Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
1
Kingdom of Lies

"Y-YOU! HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!"
How did it end up like this? He continued to walk forward while thinking about such things, when a young girl shouted at him from nearby.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

"BECAUSE I HAVE YOU, PROFESSOR."
"HUH? AH, UMM..."
Suddenly overcome with embarrassment, Celia looked down as she blushed red.

Prologue

In a world far, far away from Earth…

There was a boy.

A boy who knew that there was no salvation in this rotten world.

Here, the strong would eat, while the weak were eaten — that was the irrational law of this world. Scavenging for leftovers, begging on the streets, suffering violent abuse, and being forced into crime… Every day, this boy was exploited as a slave. His mind had long since been worn down. And yet, the boy still thirsted for something more.

He wanted to live — live, and kill a certain man; he'd go so far as to eat dirt to get it done. He clung to that one desire…

The morning sun shone through the window of a dimly lit room, just barely casting light on the interior. The smell of rusty iron permeated every inch of the small room. Dead bodies were scattered about the blood-soaked floor; a single sack sat in the corner. It was a sack just big enough to fit a small child—

"Mm! Mm, mmrgh!"

A muffled sound came from inside the squirming sack. The boy's heart thundered in his chest. He held his breath to stop his trembling and approached the sack. Fearfully, he untied the drawstring. The sack fell open with a soft sound. Sure enough, there was a young, pretty girl in an elegant priestess dress curled up inside. She had long, cascading lavender hair and purple eyes.

Ah, I knew it.

The boy had known.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

In this world...
There was no salvation.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Chapter 1: Past Life

Several years earlier, on a hot summer day in a residential area of Japan, the summer sun scorched the spanse of asphalt with its rays.

Here, a little boy and girl were saying their tearful goodbyes to each other.

“Don’t go, Haru-kun!” the crying girl said. She clung to the boy beside a parked moving van. Her name was Miharu Ayase, and she was only seven years old at the time.

“Don’t cry, Mii-chan,” the little boy said. “We’ll meet again, okay?” he added, trying to reassure the sobbing girl.

His name was Amakawa Haruto, and he was seven years old at the time.

Haruto was about to move far away to the countryside with his father; his parents were getting divorced, and he didn’t know when he’d see Miharu again, as he and his father had no plans to return anytime soon. His mother was staying in the area with his little sister, but they had already terminated the lease on their rented apartment.

Haruto’s father and Miharu’s parents were standing back and watching on with rather regretful expressions.

“No! I don’t want you to go, Haru-kun!” Miharu pleaded through her sobs.

Seeing her tears made Haruto want to cry too, but he couldn’t. He had to be brave in front of Miharu. That’s why he continued to act tough, telling Miharu that it’d be alright and that they’d see each other again. He wanted her to stop crying… even though he was frustrated and upset himself, and wanted to bawl, too.

Haruto loved Miharu…

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

And Miharu loved Haruto.

Their meeting had been a twist of fate; their parents just happened to move into the same newly built apartment building, just happened to lease rooms next to each other, just happened to have kids born in the same season of the same year. Thanks to that series of events, they somehow ended up as family friends. Haruto and Miharu were even named for the same reason: they were given the name *haru* after the Japanese word for spring — the season they were born in. As both of Haruto's parents worked full-time, the boy would often end up at Miharu's place. Since the two of them had been raised together since they were babies, they were perhaps the epitome of what one would call "childhood friends." That was probably why they were naturally drawn to each other before they even knew it themselves. Though they had no idea what love meant at the time, they knew they were incredibly precious to each other. It didn't matter whether or not they had a reason for falling in love, they just did.

They were, plain and simple, head over heels for one another.

"Haru-kun, Haru-kun… Stay with me…"

Haruto wanted to do something to stop Miharu's tears. Seeing her sad made him sad too. But Miharu's tears showed no signs of ceasing — she only continued to bawl, leaving Haruto at a complete loss. He felt powerless. What could he do? He couldn't even prevent this farewell with his most beloved childhood friend from happening. With that thought, Haruto clenched his fist.

Haruto was happy simply being together with Miharu, but that wasn't possible for him right now. They were still children, after all. Instead, he would make it possible one day — one day, he would be next to Miharu, walking alongside her forever. That's why he had to convey his feelings to her; it was the only thing he could do in this

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

moment.

"I'll come get you when we're bigger! We'll get married!" Haru said, mustering all his courage to make the first and last confession of his life. "That way… we'll always be together, I'll always be beside you, and I can protect Mii-chan with my life!"

Thump, thump. He could hear his own racing heartbeat.

"Is that… okay?" Haruto asked with a trembling voice.

Miharu had stopped crying at some point, staring at Haruto's face blankly instead.

"Yes," she answered after a beat, beaming with a dazzling bright smile.

"Yes! I want to marry Haru-kun!"

Seeing her smile made Haruto so happy. He vowed to fulfill that promise. No matter how many years passed… He would protect it — he would protect her smile. And so, with that promise and a small kiss goodbye, Haruto and Miharu went their separate ways.

It was a faint and fleeting promise, with no binding power behind it at all. It was an innocent promise, made when they had no idea what the future held… But that promise was wedged firmly into Haruto's chest, continuing to support his life to a nearly foolish degree.

After their separation, young Haruto pushed head-on into moving forward, dreaming only of his reunion with Miharu. He wanted to see her… but in order to do that, he couldn't afford to stop. As long as he put all of his effort into everything he did, he believed that their reunion would come faster. He threw himself into his studies and helped with the chores on his family's farm. His strict grandfather even taught him ancient martial arts to train his mind — which was rare to see nowadays. Thanks to that, Haruto grew into a diligent and honest adult. And his unwavering efforts didn't go unanswered: his father allowed him to enroll in a

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

famous prep school in the town where he and Miharu grew up. As a result, Haruto reunited with Miharu in the most shocking way…

In another twist of fate, the two of them enrolled into the same high school.

Though they were in different classes, the sight of Miharu's name on one of the class lists made him freeze in shock. He froze once more when he saw her. The sight of Miharu in a school uniform took his breath away. There was no mistaking her — despite the time that had passed — because she had always been precious to him. She was so near, yet so far.

Her silky-straight black hair reached all the way down her back. Her facial features were elegantly refined, and her skin was porcelain-white. She had a small stature, but her figure was well-balanced, and though she seemed somewhat reserved, she had a certain graceful air about her that attracted the gaze of anyone around her.

Miharu had grown into a picture-perfect beauty.

Haruto felt his heart skip a beat — he was overwhelmed with joy at seeing his beloved childhood friend again. Yet, at the same time, he was dumbstruck… Next to Miharu was a boy that Haruto didn't know. Seeing Miharu chatting intimately with this unknown boy shook Haruto to his core. He lost the will to talk to Miharu on the day of the entrance ceremony. On that day, Haruto went home deep in thought.

It wasn't as if he fully expected their promise to be unconditionally fulfilled upon their reunion… but Haruto's memories with Miharu were special to him. And it was because of those memories that he'd been able to come this far without wavering. The thought of Miharu forgetting their promise — the thought of there no longer being a place for Haruto — made him feel as though he'd lost his way. They might never be able to return to their past relationship. Miharu might have someone else she loves… and Haruto

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

may have been the fool for having such dreams. And yet, even so, Haruto still wanted to talk to Miharu. Tomorrow, he'd gather the courage to do so.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

But then… Miharu disappeared from Haruto's sight. She was absent for a few days after the entrance ceremony before suddenly dropping out of school completely.

There were several other students who dropped out in a similar fashion to Miharu, which caused quite a bit of a commotion amongst the students. But the school never disclosed any details, citing the protection of personal information. As he was but a helpless high school student at the time, Haruto could only watch as time passed by with no further hints or leads. He came to resent himself.

Why didn't he speak to Miharu on the day of the entrance ceremony?

If he had spoken to Miharu that day, at that moment, the future might have turned out differently. He had no proof, but he couldn't help believing that. With nothing left in him but regret, Haruto's feelings for Miharu intensified and grew twisted.

He couldn't give up. He didn't *want* to give up.

A silent scream of agony reverberated through his body. He'd received romantic confessions from girls before, but the thought of a future with a woman other than Miharu left him with an indescribable sense of panic and guilt. And yet… despite his strong feelings, there wasn't a thing he could do to find Miharu. With no path to follow, Haruto became more and more detached from the world around him.

◇◇◇

Four years passed since Miharu's disappearance.

Now, in the present day, Haruto was a 20-year-old sophomore attending a university in the city. But time had stopped for the young man. He might have been attending university, but he didn't put effort into his studies and had nothing he wanted to do, other than a part-time job at a tidy little cafe. He woke up in the morning, went to university,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

went to work, and came home — every day was an unchanging, fixed routine. To an onlooker, it might have seemed normal for a university student. But that's all it was. Haruto was wandering aimlessly with no goal, and time continued to pass in the world — until that day.

It was in the middle of summer; just like that summer day when he parted with Miharu, the sun hovered in the clear blue sky and shone down brightly on the asphalt-covered ground. But contrary to the summer weather, Haruto's expression was cold as he boarded the bus near his university campus. As it was still early in the afternoon, there weren't many passengers on board yet. After a few of them had gotten on, then off, there were only three passengers left on board: Haruto, a female student probably on her way home from extracurricular activities at the high school associated with Haruto's university, and a primary-school-aged girl. Other than the occasional announcement from the bus' PA system, the rumble of the engine was the only sound that could be heard as Haruto stared out the window at the passing scenery.

...Hm?

Haruto suddenly felt someone's eyes fixed on him. At the other end of the gaze was the primary-school-aged little girl.

She's... Endo Suzune-chan, if I recall correctly.

It just so happened that Haruto knew this girl. One time, she'd fallen asleep on her way home and missed her stop. She burst into tears when she realized how lost she was, and Haruto had helped her back to her house. Every now and then they'd end up on the same bus again, with Suzune looking his way. It made an impression on him. This time, Haruto returned her gaze and watched as she panicked and looked away.

...Did I do something wrong...?

Nothing came to mind, obviously. The only time he'd ever spoken to her was the time he'd saved her. He'd taken her to

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

her house and was thanked by her mother, so it was hard to think of any issues.

Was he just imagining it…? He considered asking her directly, but didn't want to be mistaken and end up coming off like a creep. After all, people were extremely wary of child predators nowadays.

No matter how you look at it, only a creep would talk to a little girl they barely know on the bus, right?

Yeah, better not. It was a little bothersome, but Haruto gave up with a small sigh and forced Suzune's gaze out of his mind.

" —!"

The bus gave a sudden, lurching jerk. Haruto felt a soaring sensation before intense pain rippled throughout his body — he was launched through the air and slammed into the roof.

"Gah… hah…"

Everything hurt. He couldn't breathe.

His body felt hot, like it had been doused in boiling water. The horribly crushed interior of the bus reflected in his darkening vision as his consciousness rapidly slipped away.

D-Did we… crash…?

Despite his extremely hazy mind, Haruto somehow managed to process that thought. He was aware of his probable death. Everything should have been in pain, yet he was slowly losing feeling in his body instead. He could tell he was on death's doorstep. With that thought, he was suddenly wracked with fear.

"Nnnh… gah…"

He mustered the last bit of strength he had to open his mouth, but all that escaped was a cough filled with blood.

Mii… cha…

As his heart called out Miharu's former nickname, a single teartop fell from his eye and mixed with blood. But just as Haruto was about to lose consciousness…

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Haru……

A melodic voice echoed in Haruto’s head. At the same time, a huge, circular, geometric pattern started to rise from the ground, emitting a glowing light.

“And now, the news. A truck collided with a bus in the Tokyo metropolitan area at 3:23pm today. Three passengers on board the bus have been confirmed dead, while the drivers of both vehicles are critically injured but miraculously alive. The cause of the accident was determined to be the driver of the truck falling asleep at the wheel…”

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Chapter 2: Another World

Year 989 of the Holy Era.

The continent of Euphelia. The kingdom of Beltrum and its capital, Beltrant, were located in the Strahl region, towards the west side of this land.

It was here in these lands that a mother and child lived modestly — but happily — in a small house. The mother was a lovely and attractive woman, and her son was comparably cute in an androgynous way.

On one fine summer day…

“Hey, mom. Why do we have black hair? No one around us has black hair.”

The little boy peered up at his mother with caramel-colored eyes. Indeed, there were no other black-haired people in the capital they lived in. Because of that, the two of them were treated as oddities in their neighborhood.

His mother looked troubled by his question.

“You’re right, Rio,” she said, taking a moment to answer him. “Perhaps it’s because we came from somewhere far away.”

“Do all of the people who live far away have black hair?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s not just you and me. Your father’s hair was black, too… and so was your grandmother’s and grandfather’s hair.”

Her son, whose name was Rio, had asked so curiously — his mother couldn’t help but smile as a result as she answered him. Seeing her smile made the boy so happy, making him beam right back at her. To the young boy who had just turned five, his mother was his everything.

“Huh! I’d like to meet grandma and grandpa someday.”

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“…Yes, that’d be nice,” the mother replied. “I’ll take you to see them when you get bigger. They’re in a place called the Yagumo region.” Her smile had become troubled again as she spoke.

“Really? You promise?”

“Mmhm. I promise.”

◇◇◇

Two years later, in the year 991 of the Holy Era. Early spring.

In the slums of Beltrant, the capital of the Beltrum kingdom, there lived a small orphan boy. He was curled in the corner of a dark and shabby wooden shack, the air dry and chilly.

“Hah… hah…”

The boy panted for breath, his cheeks bright red. He groaned openly, tormented by his nightmares. The dirty rags he wore on his body were soaked through with sweat; at just a glance, it was clear that he had a fever. There were traces of multiple people living in the run-down shack, but none of them were present to nurse the sick boy. Who knew how long the boy had been alone like this? He was alone, left lying on the cold floor in a single layer of clothing. It wouldn’t have been surprising if he’d died like this. And yet —

At one point, a warm, gentle light began to shine and embrace the boy’s body. It was a different kind of heat from the fever that had been tormenting the boy… *This* heat was warm and comfortable enough to entrust oneself to. Color rapidly returned to the boy’s face, and his breathing evened out. For some reason, the fever that ailed the boy’s body was gone, and the light that covered his body disappeared with a subtle flash.

“Mmh…”

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

The boy blearily opened his eyes sometime later. Lying on his back, he blinked until his vision cleared and a dimly-lit wooden ceiling came into focus. His mind was still hazy, as though there was a fog preventing him from thinking clearly. The fever was gone, but not without consequence. He was still weak, and had yet to recover his strength and stamina. Overwhelmed with fatigue, the boy stared blankly at the ceiling. His mind managed to recover to a point where he could process his thoughts again; pushing his weary body up into a sitting position, he started to wonder about his situation.

"Ugh..."

A dull pain ached in his muscles, making the boy wince. It might have been a result of the cold he caught, or perhaps from sleeping on the hard floor. A glance around at his surroundings revealed a dismal room with some shabby furniture placed in the middle.

This is...

A room he was very familiar with, the boy thought... And yet, something inexplicably felt out of place. He knew he'd lived in this room for a while, now... but he was also seeing it for the first time. It shouldn't have been possible, but it was almost as though there were two people's consciousnesses within him...

Something just didn't feel right... rather, something was muddled with his memories. As he looked around the room in a daze, a sour smell suddenly pierced his senses. The boy noticed the rags he was wearing were soaked with sweat. He furrowed his brow, mind now awakened. With a deep breath, he collapsed back on the floor; he felt like lying down for a little longer. He lifted a hand to place against his forehead — but in the next moment, he gasped loudly and stared intently at his hand.

It was definitely his hand... the small hand of a seven-year-old boy. But it was... weird. There was something

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

strange about it…

Ignoring the headache pounding in his head, the boy kicked his hazy brain back into gear.

A child's hand…? I… Wait, I?…

Rio — that was the boy's name. He was an orphan living in the slums of Beltrum's capital, sworn to take revenge on a certain man. That was why he had grasped at straws to survive up until this point. That *should* have been the entirety of Rio's existence…

So why did he have another person's worth of memories? The memories of a person living in another world, in an unfamiliar civilization, with technology that he didn't recognize…

Broken images of various scenes flashed through his mind… They seemed all-too realistic to be written off as just the imagination of a seven-year-old boy. They showed the life of a completely different person. Someone named Amakawa Haruto. According to his memories, he was a twenty-year-old university student. No — even now, Rio was living that life, as if those memories had happened to him just moments ago. A strange unsettled feeling fell over Rio, causing him to shake his head violently.

What am I thinking? Amakawa Haruto…?

The set of dual memories left Rio feeling confused. He looked down at his hands, as if he were trying to escape reality. But it wasn't the unblemished skin of a Japanese child who grew up well provided for in the age of plenty. These were the hands of someone that was underweight from malnutrition; the skin was dry and rough and covered in a thin layer of grime.

Of course… According to his memories as an orphan, he hadn't had a bath in ages.

Seriously…?

It was so unhygienic. Rio grimaced. The tattered clothes he wore were stiff and made of hemp, and he couldn't

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

remember the last time he'd washed them. Of course, he didn't have any proper socks or shoes, either… But he should be grateful he had something to wear at all, he guessed. His hair was disheveled and pretty damaged, too. But he could tell it was black in color underneath all of the filth.

"…Phew."

Rio breathed in and out, deeply, trying to calm himself and organize his memories. He placed a hand against his mouth in thought. He was Rio… and he was apparently the university student Amakawa Haruto as well, with seven years worth of memories from living in Beltrum's capital and twenty years worth of memories from living in Japan. But no matter how much his memories were doubled, he wasn't Amakawa Haruto. If he were Haruto, he wouldn't be a little boy right now, much less in a place like this. And if his memories were correct, the young man named Amakawa Haruto wasn't even alive.

"In my memories, I died on the bus… I think?"

He remembered being on a bus that hit something, and he remembered being in extreme pain, like his limbs were torn apart. He couldn't remember what happened after that, but it was hard to imagine recovering from something like that.

"Where am I right now…? Is this a dream? The afterlife? Was I… reborn?"

He listed off every possibility he could think of, but there was something too raw about this reality to write off everything as a dream. It was hard to imagine that this was the afterlife, too. Although… this place, while definitely not heaven, was as close to hell as it could get.

Which meant he was most likely reborn, Rio suspected. Could such a fantastical story be real? Did this Amakawa Haruto even exist? Had these memories in his head actually happened? But no matter how much he wondered, no one would tell him the answer. There was no answer. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was Rio, not Haruto.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

As time passed, the different memories and personality within him confused him less and less, and Haruto's persona merged with Rio's. Their two different memories and personalities showed on the surface, but blended together without conflict underneath. Haruto showed up more intensely because he'd had far more life experiences, but Rio was able to accept that part of him. That was why they were able to perceive each other's memories as their own experience and still remain sane over the situation at hand. Even so… Rio thought it best not to think too deeply about how strange it felt.

But right now, he had a bigger problem…

Rrrgghhhh. The sound of an empty stomach echoed throughout the room, and Rio came to the depressing realization that he was starving. He sighed; the hunger he felt made him feel a bit lightheaded. There were a lot of things on his mind: whether these memories of another life were real, why was he reborn if so, and why did he only get those memories now?

But Rio knew full well how futile it was to ask those questions. Instead, he shifted his thoughts to trying to break out of his dire situation. Haruto's memories and personality played a big role in how he was thinking so calmly right now. If it had been Rio and only Rio, he would have died a dog's death as an orphan, with no prospects for his future.

That would've been the worst possible outcome… and it would have been unacceptable, for Rio had a goal to fulfill. He couldn't afford to die here.

If I die now, that man…

He recalled his deep-seated hatred for the man and gritted his teeth.

Rio's father died shortly after his birth, and his mother was killed when he was still small. He'd lived in these dumpster-like slums ever since.

His parents were both immigrants from a faraway land.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

They were adventurers that planned their lives around their travels. But when Ayame, his mother, was pregnant with Rio, she temporarily withdrew from adventuring. This left the financial burden of their livelihood on Rio's father, Zen, who was a skilled adventurer. Unfortunately, he died not long after Rio was born. Despite this, Ayame continued to raise Rio admirably; she lived a modest life and dug into her savings in order to raise her child. But their peaceful life together ended when Rio was only five years old.

Ayame was an exotic, foreign beauty. She may have had Rio, but she was still young enough to be targeted by vulgar men and their obscene looks. With the still infant Rio as a weakness, Ayame was easily swallowed up by the evil around her and brutally murdered before Rio.

He could still remember that moment as clear as day. From that point on, he swore to take revenge on the person who killed his mother, living every moment from then on for that purpose. That raison d'être remained carved into Rio's soul even after Haruto's memories cropped up… but now, he had Haruto's morals, too. While he truly detested his mother's killer with every fiber of his being, Haruto's morals within him questioned whether revenge was a necessary evil…

But Rio's morals and desire for revenge burned too strongly. Just the thought of that man made his emotions turn an ugly black.

Revenge is evil? What empty words…

Rio scowled, clicking his tongue in irritation at the conflicting opinion coming from within.

Just then, the door to the shack was yanked open. Rio pushed his exhausted body up so that he could look at the doorway as several men and one woman crowded into the small wooden shack.

"Hmm? Oh, Rio! Are you finally awake?" asked one of the men standing at the front of the group as he spotted Rio in

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

the dimly-lit shack. The boy knew him.

“Huh! So you actually survived. Thought you were a goner… Hey, boss! Rio’s still kicking! We thought he was good as dead before…” the man yelled. His eyes were wide with surprise as he directed his voice toward the back of the group, where a giant man stood over the rest.

“Ha! What a lucky brat. You were almost keelin’ over from yer fever yesterday… We were gonna toss you out if you were still sleepin’ today,” said the giant man who had been referred to as boss; he sounded impressed.

“…Yes. Somehow.” Rio replied, holding back a frown.

These men were a group of jacks-of-all-trades here in the slums. They had a large circle of influence and earned their money working as outlaws-for-hire and by taking requests for all kinds of evil activities. Human trafficking, illegal trading, robbery, swindling, extortion, transportation and disposal of stolen goods… even hit jobs. The list of crimes they were willing to get their hands dirty for was endless.

To these men, an orphan in the slums was like a convenient, disposable pawn. Easy to obtain, use, and throw away — which they often did. Rio was one such pawn that these men had picked up. He lived in this small shack with them and lived in fear of being subjected to their abuse. Sometimes they would hit him for stress relief, sometimes they would force him to assist with their crimes, using him as a scapegoat or bait while they escaped.

In a word, Rio was their slave.

But in this cruel world, his survival depended on them. In fact, he had survived until today by desperately obeying them.

“Hey, it’s cold in here. Let’s get to celebrating and warm ourselves up!” said the other underling.

He walked to the shabby wooden table in the middle of the room and placed some food and alcohol down with a thud.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Good idea. Hey — leave *that* in the corner. S’been drugged to sleep, so *don’t go wakin’ it up*,” ordered the leader of the group of men.

One underling moved to place a sack with their spoils on the floor. Then, in high spirits, the men had the sole woman in the group pour their drinks, and they began to eat.

“But ten gold coins sure was a great haul… right, boss?”

One of the underlings cackled.

“Hmph. It’s ten gold for cargo transport. Can’t be anything decent… I doubt it’s just a slave inside. Probably some noble’s kid or something.”

“Wait, what? You lot better not be doing anything dangerous again,” the woman pouring the drinks said with a disapproving expression.

“Well… yeah.”

The giant leader yanked the woman closer to him and snorted with a smug smirk on his face.

“But ten gold coins fer a side-job like that? It’s freakin’ amazing.”

“Yeah.”

The leader took a large gulp of his alcohol and took a ferocious bite of his hunk of meat. Rio watched on from the side, swallowing his saliva hungrily. The topic of their conversation was ominous, but Rio was far more interested in the food in their hands. While it was evident they weren’t doing any decent work… if Rio had helped even a little, he would have been given something to eat. But this time around, Rio had been sleeping off his sickness, so the chance of them feeding him was extremely low. It wouldn’t happen unless they were in a really good mood…

The relationship between Rio and these men was simple: the strong and the weak, the exploiters and the exploited.

They’d shelter him as long as they could exploit him, then mercilessly throw him out once he was done. Rio had seen them do that to many other children already. While he didn’t

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

intend on continuing their relationship forever, he was just a seven-year-old child. Only the fittest could survive on the streets of the slums, and he doubted he could live for very long out there without them. But at that very moment, the smell of the food was unbearable on his empty stomach.

I'm hungry…

It was all he could think about. He was too fatigued for anything else. Rio let the men's conversation wash over him, only half-listening as he sat slumped in the corner of the shack, resting his body, when suddenly—

"Heeey Rio. Rio!" one of the underlings called out to Rio.

"Yes?"

"Your fever sweat stinks like crap. Go wash yourself — you're ruining the food and drink."

"…Okay."

He'd hoped that they would give him food, but that was just his wishful thinking. The underling pinched his nose and made a shooing gesture with his hand. Apparently, the sweat made Rio's body odor a lot stronger than he realized.

"I'm sorry."

Rio bowed his head once and staggered to his feet. Although Amakawa Haruto didn't know the man at all, Rio knew the underling very well. It was a mysterious feeling. Stumbling over his feet, Rio hobbled towards the door of the shack.

"Rio! If yer still not better, we'll sell ya off as a slave. The only thing y'got goin' fer ya is yer devil's luck and pretty face, after all," the leader said gleefully, already well on his way to being drunk. The underlings roared with laughter, as if he had said something hilarious.

"Oh, stop picking on children!"

The woman pouring the drinks chided them exasperatedly, but Rio continued walking out the door without looking back. He closed the door behind him.

"Rio."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Rio turned back at the sound of his name being called. The door reopened immediately, and the woman who was pouring drinks stepped outside.

"Go get yourself some breakfast with this. It should be enough for some stale bread and plain broth," the woman said, placing three small copper coins in Rio's hand.

This woman was the prostitute the leader favored the most. She was also on amicable terms with Rio, often looking out for him like this.

"...Thank you very much, Gigi. Are you sure?"

Gigi responded with a kind smile when Rio thanked her. "Just make sure you come play with me when you're a little older."

"Haha..." Rio laughed awkwardly.

"I'm just kidding. I've told you before how I have a niece your age, right? You remind me of her, that's all. I'm going to quit this job soon anyway," Gigi explained with a shrug.

"I'm opening a shop with Angela, my little sister. Come visit us someday," she said with a soft smile.

Rio had heard about that from Gigi before. Gigi and her sister, Angela, were working as prostitutes while saving to open their store. Rio intended on paying her back some day, but just as he opened his mouth to tell her so—

"You seem different today... did something happen to you?" Gigi asked with wide eyes.

"Huh? Umm... I'm not sure what you mean," Rio answered uncertainly and tilted his head. He was startled.

"So you can make that kind of face, too. Your pretty face looks *much* better when it isn't sulking," Gigi said cheerfully.

"Er... sure," Rio hesitantly agreed. "I'll keep that in mind, I guess."

"Alright. Off you go, now. They'll get mad at me if I chat with you for too long."

"Right. Thank you. For everything."

Rio bowed his head deeply, then left.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

◇◇◇

The time was still early morning.

The worn-down wooden shack sat in the chaotic rows of the slums, where the air was characteristically stagnant. Nevertheless, the shining rays of the morning sun managed to make everything feel a bit better.

Although the men had ordered Rio to wash himself, there was no proper bathing area in the slums. He needed to leave the area and walk to the closest well if he wanted to clean himself. The capital of Beltrant was split into multiple blocks by walls that surrounded the castle in the center. Entering the city required both a permission form and an entry fee. Naturally, living within the walls was safer and more comfortable, but that was only possible for the rich and powerful; it was a sign of greater wealth to live closer to the castle. Meanwhile, travel between districts outside of the walls was completely free. The people who couldn't live inside the walls could be found in these areas instead. Although they weren't as safe, they showed different growth compared to the districts inside the walls. The slums were located in the outskirts of the district outside the castle, and while there was no entry fee, the state of law and order was the worst of all the districts outside the castle walls. They'd fallen out of reach of the government's supervision and become a lawless area left to its own devices as a result. One never entered the slums willingly, unless you had no choice but to live there.

Rio left the slums and headed for a nearby district with a well, then quickly washed himself and his clothes. Since it was still early, there were barely any people walking on the streets. Thanks to that, he was able to use the well in peace. Of course, there was no proper soap or warm water that could be used, but he did the best he could.

After thoroughly washing himself, Rio stopped by a street

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

stall on his way back and filled his stomach with some cheap, hard bread and sludge-like broth. Then he made his way back to the entrance of the slums. He found a sunny spot and sat down, staring at the ground as he waited for his clothes to dry.

It was early spring, but it was still too cold to be outside half-naked, and he was still recovering from his sickness. Fortunately, Rio was used to life in the slums, so it wasn't unbearable. At this early hour, the red-light district neighboring the slums was gradually emptying out. Both the women that sold their services and the men that bought them were making their way home. Barely any of them headed home towards the slums, though. The only ones that did were ruffians that had struck it rich for the night. Rio had no particular interest in them, so he sat and thought about what to do next. In all honesty, he didn't think he could live with the men in the shack for much longer — sooner or later, he'd be run into the ground if he did.

That being said, the world just wasn't kind enough to let an orphan live on his own without any plans. The only chance an orphan had of survival in the slums was by scavenging for leftovers, stealing from others, or being used by violent gangs, like Rio was. There were no other options.

Stealing is out of the question. I'd prefer some kind of job, if possible...

He knew his chances were bleak. It wouldn't be easy to find someone willing to hire someone like him in this dismal society. Orphans from the slums were already considered to be at a high risk of committing theft in marketplaces and such, making people all the more wary of them. Not to mention, if it were that easy to find a job, orphans wouldn't exist. Even if they did manage to find one, they'd be exploited and underpaid. Since that was the case, Rio wondered if he had any useful talents he could use to his advantage. The only special skills he had were the ones he

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

obtained in his previous life: a university-level education, the ability to do housework and other life skills obtained from living alone, as well as a myriad of other know-hows from his family home and part-time job. He searched his head for a way to apply these skills in a useful manner, but it was nearly impossible without the right social connections.

This meant that the only options left were the less-than-legal methods, but Rio — no, Amakawa Haruto *inside* of Rio — was extremely reluctant about turning to crime, which was a weakness that Rio himself had long since thrown away. Really, there was no point in avoiding criminal activities anyway, considering how often Rio had been forced to act as an accomplice for the men that used him. The realization of how dirty his hands were rose within him, overwhelming him with guilt. It was too late for him. The corner of Rio's mouth quirked up in a self-deprecating smirk as he stared at his palms with a furrowed brow.

At that moment—

"Hey, you there. Little… girl?" a stern, womanly voice said to Rio.

He raised his head to see four people of various ages standing before him. They all wore nice, clean robes that hid their faces and covered their bodies, so Rio couldn't tell their genders from their appearance. Looking at their heights, the one who addressed Rio was probably the oldest in the group. Judging by how young the person sounded, they were most likely in their late teens. Behind the one who spoke was a figure who looked to be the size of an early teen and two child-sized figures — they were probably around Rio's age.

Apparently, the one who spoke to Rio was unsure of his gender, too. His face had always been rather androgynous, and his hair had grown long and scruffy, making it easy to mistake him for a girl.

"Stinks…" one of the small children muttered under their breath in disgust.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

The voice sounded feminine, like a little girl. It was a melodic and cute sound, which ran contrary to the blunt and scathing words.

"It would be best to avoid breathing in too much. It might be bad for your health," the other small child said.

This one also sounded like a little girl.

They sure are saying whatever they please…

Rio frowned, slightly upset at their words. He was aware of the fact that his current state wasn't ideal, but he had just washed himself…

Rio turned to look at the two little girls. Their faces were covered by hoods, but he could feel them looking down on him anyway. Meanwhile, the small figure next to them was also watching Rio observantly. He couldn't feel any negative emotions behind this gaze, though.

"Hey, are you listening to me?" the eldest woman asked in a serious tone. "Don't tell me you can't even understand what I'm saying."

She seemed to be in a hurry for some reason as she threateningly pressed for a reply.

"I hear you. What do you want?" Rio replied coldly.

He observed the four of them cautiously — their clothes were too clean for them to be residents of the slums. He could see an expensive-looking hilt peeking out from between the robes of the eldest woman. What could they possibly want from an orphan of the slums? They didn't seem like the types that would want to hire thieves, but Rio raised his guard anyway.

"Have you seen a little girl with lavender hair? She's around your age," the woman explained.

There was an air of superiority behind her words, as though she was looking down on someone that she expected would obey her orders.

So they were looking for someone.

Rio wasn't particularly bothered by her attitude, but he

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

didn’t feel obliged to answer her politely, either. And in any case, he didn’t have any clue where this girl could be. He stood up with a sigh and shot them one more glance before briskly walking away.

“Hey, wait. Answer the question,” the woman called back to Rio, clicking her tongue in annoyance.

“No clue. Sorry,” Rio said, pausing mid-step and tossing his answer over his shoulder.

“Answer her properly.”

“Hiding the truth won’t benefit you.”

The two little girls pressed Rio imperiously, seemingly doubting Rio’s statement. He huffed.

“Like I said—”

“I don’t think he’ll answer if we speak to him like that, everyone.”

Just as Rio was about to restate his point, the small figure who had been silent until now interrupted him. It sounded like the slightly tired voice of yet another girl.

“Hm… Celia.”

The eldest woman looked at the girl she had called Celia.

“Please leave this to me, Miss Vanessa.”

“Good idea,” the woman addressed as Vanessa said, hesitating for a brief moment before passing the baton to Celia. “A teaching professor like you could probably handle this situation best.”

Celia then took a step forward.

“Hello there. Sorry if we surprised you before. Will you tell me your name?” she asked kindly. “Oh, and I’m Celia.”

“…Rio,” he muttered in response.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Rio? That’s an unusual name.”

“…I’m a migrant child, so.”

“I see… so that’s why your hair is black. Would you mind if I asked you a question, Rio?”

“Go ahead.” Rio nodded.

“Have you seen a little girl with lavender hair by any chance? We’re currently looking for her. Would you happen to have any ideas?”

“Sorry, I haven’t seen anyone like that…” Rio shook his head.

But you’re probably too late, he didn’t add.

He couldn’t imagine any child from another district remaining unharmed after wandering into the slums. To the residents of the slums, even commoner clothes could be resold for a ridiculous amount. If the aforementioned girl was related to these four in any way, she’d probably be wearing high-quality clothes — those would have been long stripped from her by now. If she was lucky, that’d be all that was taken. She could end up in one of those brothels for men that had a taste for little girls.

“I see…” Celia’s voice trailed off with disappointment. She took a breath and pulled herself together before asking, “The slums are past here, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Is it a big area? Would we get lost easily if we went in?”

“It’s pretty big, and the roads are kind of complicated… Are you going to go in?” Rio’s eyes widened a little.

“Yes. We have to find this girl,” Celia asserted without hesitation.

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Why not?”

Celia tilted her head in confusion as Rio looked her up and down.

“…Your clothes are too nice. It’s like you’re asking to be attacked. There aren’t many people around this early, but

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

you're still asking for trouble. It's not a place for a girl like you," he informed her politely. Celia's eyes widened in surprise.

"He sure speaks well for an orphan," one of the smaller girls muttered.

"Ah, I see. It must really be a dangerous place," Celia said, looking down at her own outfit with a strained smile.

"This was a plainer robe, too..." she mumbled to herself.

If Rio didn't have Amakawa Haruto's memories and personality within him, he probably wouldn't have shared that information with Celia. He especially wouldn't have bothered with the warning if it had just been Vanessa, who was overbearing, and the two little girls.

They could wander off and die in the slums for all he cared.

That's what he was supposed to feel in the bottom of his heart... yet, the man named Amakawa Haruto was kind. Kind enough to stop a little girl who spoke to him with the minimal level of respect from wandering into the slums.

"Umm... what kind of clothes do women in the slums wear, then?"

"What do they wear? Just your usual commoner clothes, worn down to rags. There are people in nice clothes, too, but they're usually the types that run wild in the slums."

"I see. That's very helpful." Celia nodded cutely in contemplation. "By the way, you speak very politely for an orphan. Do all orphans talk like you do?"

"...Who knows? My mother told me to speak this way before she died," Rio answered rather stiffly.

At just seven years old, Rio didn't have a very extensive vocabulary. But he knew that speaking rudely would just make the men hit him, so he had learned to speak while judging other people's moods. With his mother's original influence and Amakawa Haruto's personality returning to him, Rio's mentality had grown and changed his speech into

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

that of an adult's.

"S-Sorry, I shouldn't have asked that," Celia apologized in a fluster.

"No, it's fine…" Rio answered rather listlessly.

"…"

Celia's eyes widened by a fraction, as though she had seen a glimpse of an unknown emotion deep within Rio's eyes.

"Celia, let's return after we change our clothes," Vanessa interrupted. She had been quietly watching on.

"What are you saying! We have to hurry or she'll—"

"That's right!"

The two small girls frantically protested.

"If our information is correct, we still have some time. Don't forget — we're moving against protocol. We cannot afford to make a wrong move and mess up the official search party's efforts. Don't you agree, Christina?"

"…Then let's hurry and buy the clothes," the little girl named Christina said, frowning unhappily at Vanessa's explanation.

"Celia, are there any suspicious sources of essence nearby?"

"Umm… give me a moment. *Zona Revelare!*"

Celia took a deep breath and chanted some words that Rio didn't recognize. A geometric circle of light began to rise from beneath her feet.

Hm?

A strange sensation immediately washed over Rio. It almost felt like some kind of… pulse. At the same time, he could see a faint wave of light being released from Celia herself. Was he hallucinating? Rio rubbed his eyes to check, when—

"Oh. You…"

Celia inspected Rio's face up close.

"What about the child?" asked Vanessa.

"My area search reacted to him. I've adjusted my magic to

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

react to a certain level of magic essence, which means this child has a fair amount of it flowing from him. He has the potential to use sorcery."

"Ah, right... even an orphan can have the potential," Vanessa said.

"This kid has essence?"

Whereas Vanessa accepted the situation easily, Christina tilted her head doubtfully.

"There are some humans outside of nobility with enough essence to use magic. Their parents might not have much essence, but they may have had an ancestor up the line that once did. Even so, none of that matters if they don't receive any training, since they won't be able to detect it otherwise. Most people go their whole lives unaware," Celia explained simply.

"Huh... Guess you can't judge everything by appearances," the still unnamed little girl muttered.

"Hmm, makes sense... but he's still an orphan. Essence is irrelevant."

Vanessa shot a pointed look at Rio.

Magic? Essence? Was essence the strange pulse of light just now? I definitely felt something... but they said I shouldn't be able to detect it without training...? What does that mean?

Rio listened to their conversation in confusion.

"So were there any suspicious essence reactions?"

"Nothing within a radius of 50 meters, at least. The only one caught by my search was this child here," Celia explained.

"I see," Vanessa said. "Sorry for making you come out here, but you've been a great help. *Zona Revelare* users are rare and no one else can compare to your search range."

The two continued their puzzling conversation, leaving Rio completely lost, until Celia broke off and turned to him again.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Thank you. Will you accept this in exchange for the information you gave us?” she asked, and handed Rio five large silvers. He accepted the coins and looked at them in shock. Five large silvers was worth way more than the information he told them… Perhaps this girl didn’t have a sense of money? He looked at the girl in wonder, but…

“Oh, is it not enough?” she asked.

“…No.”

After a beat, Rio shook his head. He would accept whatever money he was given — he didn’t have the freedom to refuse out of politeness in his current situation.

“Thank you very much,” he said, bowing his head at Celia in gratitude.

“Just to be clear, this also serves as hush money. Forget what you saw and heard here,” Celia warned in a slightly colder tone.

“I understand.” Rio nodded immediately.

These four were probably nobles, and Rio had absolutely no interest in sticking his neck into the troublesome business of nobility. Curiosity killed the cat, after all.

“Well… thank you. For telling us so kindly,” Celia thanked him awkwardly.

“…It was my pleasure.”

“Bye, then. Take care of yourself.”

Celia seemed to have formed an attachment to the orphan during their short interaction, as she gave Rio a somewhat regretful smile from under her hood.

“Let’s go, Celia.”

“Yes.”

The four of them turned on their heels and walked away from the entrance of the slums. Rio watched their retreating backs, straining his eyes when he noticed a strange light faintly flowing out of their bodies. With a gasp, he fixed his gaze down at his own body. The same faint light that the girls had was flowing out of himself. It wasn’t a

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

hallucination. He could both see *and* feel it. The light flowed through his entire body like the blood in his veins. It streamed out of his body endlessly, like water from a spring. The group of four gave off the most light in the descending order of Celia, Christina, Vanessa, and the one who might have been Christina's attendant. However, the amount of light flowing out of Rio's body was far greater than even Celia's.

When did this light first start to release out of him? Were Celia and the others aware of it? Such questions passed through Rio's mind, but he couldn't find an answer for any of them.

Can other people see this light too? Would it be bad if they noticed it?

In a panic, he focused on decreasing the amount of light coming out, only to find it was surprisingly compliant with his will. There was still some leaking out, but it was much less than Celia's group's, so it probably wouldn't be an issue. Rio sighed in relief.

Is this light "magic essence"...?

If it really was an essence, he should be able to do something with it intuitively. But attempting such actions without any knowledge of it risked things spiraling out of control, so he needed to pick a better time and place for experimenting with it.

It would be bad if he returned late as well, so Rio decided to head back to the shack for now.

◇◇◇

On the way back to the shack, Rio's head buzzed with thoughts about his future. He could live off the five large silvers he received from Celia for quite a while, but he still couldn't break off from the men until he had some form of stable income. There was nowhere to run from them in the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

slums, and they'd probably hunt him down and kill him if they discovered that he'd run away.

Still... for now, with both his stomach and pocket filled, Rio felt a little better. With his new funds in hand, all he wanted now was some time to carefully plan how to get away from the men, his escape route, and how to live going forward. Eventually, he arrived back at the shabby shack while pondering such things. The sight of it immediately dampened his mood. He sighed.

"I'm back."

He entered the shack with a small bow. The men would yell at Rio for no reason at all sometimes, but they had been in high spirits this morning, bringing Gigi — who was their favorite — over to pour them drinks, so that wasn't as likely today. They were probably partying and making an uproar right now.

Or so Rio had thought.

The lamp is out?

The inside of the shack was pitch black and completely silent, The window was closed and the lamp that lit the room had been extinguished, making it impossible to see. A sharp, metallic smell of rusted iron pierced his senses, making Rio frown.

What's that smell? Blood?

The scent that wafted into Rio's mind was blood... the same blood like when he got injured.

"Mmrgh! Mmmgh!"

Just then, a muffled sound could be heard inside the shack. It was coming from the corner of the room.

"...!"

The sudden sound made Rio flinch in surprise.

What's that?

He could hear the rustling of fabric. Had someone fallen asleep?

Rio warily started to inch towards the sound when his foot

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

slipped. He could feel a mysterious liquid against the sole of his bare foot. The floor was wet. Suspicious of the unknown substance that felt so strange against his skin, Rio decided to open the window first.

The window is…

Relying on his memory of the room's layout, he ignored the uncomfortable sensation under his feet and proceeded towards the wooden shack's only window. He threw it fully open; light flooded in from outside, illuminating the dark room.

"Wha…"

Rio fell speechless at the horrendous scene before his eyes.

There were dead bodies lying everywhere. The bodies of the men who were drinking in the shack earlier, and—

"Gigi…"

It was the dead body of the prostitute. The girl who gave Rio money for food in the morning was now a bloodied corpse. She lay face-up, her provocative dress completely soaked red with blood.

"Urgh…"

Rio wanted to throw up. He pressed a hand against his mouth and resisted the urge.

"Mm! Mm, mmrgh!"

The muffled sound could still be heard inside the room. Rio's frown deepened as he directed his gaze towards it — the single sack sat in the corner of the room. There was something alive inside of it.

A person…? No way…

It didn't look big enough to fit an adult. If it was a person… then it had to be a child.

Rio had an extremely bad feeling about this. His heartbeat thundered in his chest, and he held his breath to stop his trembling. He fearfully approached the sack. It squirmed as though it was declaring its presence. Rio slowly untied the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

drawstring and the sack fell open with a soft sound. Sure enough, there was a pretty girl in a beautiful priestess-like dress inside. The lavender-haired girl, who was close to Rio's age, looked up at him with dazed, purple eyes.

Ah, I knew it.

At that moment, he was overcome with despair. Warning bells tolled loudly in his head; they were telling him to stop standing there. He had to flee this place as soon as possible… yet the sight of the frightened girl in front of him rooted him to that spot.

"…Are you all right?" Rio couldn't help but ask.

The girl nodded once. Her terrified eyes watched him carefully, but their shared age range seemed to help her lower her guard a little. Fortunately, she was tied up inside the sack sideways, so she was still unaware of the horrific scene that had unfolded in the room. She might have been more panicked if she'd noticed.

Well, she'd realize soon enough.

"I'll remove the gag and ropes. Hold on," Rio said, removing the gag first.

"Pwah… hah…"

The little girl gasped heavily for air. She was rather sluggish, and her face seemed feverish.

"W-Where..? Where… am I…?"

Her small body trembled as she asked, possibly from fear of the dim room, the cold air, or both.

"The slums. This is the house where the gang that bossed me around lived…" Rio answered while untying the ropes around her body with nimble fingers.

"T-The slums? W-Why am I…" the girl asked in confusion.

"Who knows? I'm done. You can stand up now," Rio said once the ropes were gone.

"O-Okay. Thank you very m… ah, oww."

The girl tried to thank him as she stood up, but her legs had no strength and gave out. She'd gotten up halfway

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

before collapsing back down.

"You okay?" Rio grabbed the falling girl and turned her onto her back, gently.

"Y-Yes."

Although she responded with an affirmative, her breathing was shallow and her body was feverish.

"Really…?" Rio questioned doubtfully as he observed the girl's face.

Is this the girl Celia's group was looking for earlier…?

He had all the reason to believe that this was the girl that the four nobles he met near the slums earlier were searching for. With her lavender hair and beautiful upper-class dress, he was certain of it.

"U-Umm…" she murmured quietly to Rio, as though it took all of her energy to speak. She was probably suffering from dehydration after being in the sack this whole time.

"Sorry… Could you take me… to the castle…?" she panted out.

"Castle?"

"Please… I'll tell my father… to reward you…"

"Your father…" Rio shuddered. There was no way that would end well.

"And also, water…"

So she was thirsty after all.

"Lie there and wait for a bit. Don't move," Rio said.

He walked over to the barrel where the water was stored. His nose had already become desensitized to the smell, but seeing the bloody scene with his eyes made his expression twist. Contrary to the constant revulsion turning his stomach, Rio was strangely calm as he asked himself what was he doing here. He filled the wooden mug he usually used with water and quickly brought it back to the collapsed girl.

"Here. Water. Don't drink it all at once."

He lifted her head to make it easier for her to drink and offered her the mug. It would have been best to add some

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

salt or sugar to help her dehydration, but such fancy ingredients weren't available in the shack.

The girl gulped down the water gratefully.

"Puhah… hah…" she coughed.

"Slow down. Drinking too fast is bad for you," Rio warned.

"O-Okay…" she replied weakly.

Perhaps she was relieved she had quenched her thirst, because in the next moment, she lost all the strength in her body.

"H-Hey!"

Rio tried to wake her frantically, but she was out cold.

"Did she pass out…?"

Figuring that was the case, Rio closed his eyes and held back the urge to sigh heavily. He gently let her lie back down, when…

Creak. The floor of the shabby old shack groaned, breaking the silence of the room. Rio whipped around to see a masked man approaching him—

The masked man lunged, trying to stab a knife into Rio's body. He was going to be killed. Heart-stopping fear ran through Rio in that moment. Suddenly, his hands moved of their own accord and he skillfully parried the man's swing; the knife missed its mark and slashed through empty space instead.

"Wha…"

A surprised voice leaked from the man's masked face as Rio looked at his hands in astonishment. His physical body had reproduced the movements that Amakawa Haruto mastered in his previous life. Rio had been so desperate that his body reacted instinctively.

But now was not the time to be distracted.

Was this guy hidden this whole time? Why is he trying to kill me?

The first real battle of his life had been suddenly thrust upon him. Rio was panicking, but that was understandable.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

He'd never faced off with someone holding a blade with the intent to kill before, previous life or not. His body felt hot and he could feel the thudding of his heart echo through his body. He hadn't even moved very much, yet he was panting for breath. He was terrified — his legs trembled where he stood. Rio braced his trembling hands to fight and inched backwards. The masked man regarded him cautiously, having had his attack smoothly evaded. He kept the knife pointed at Rio.

To be honest, that first attack was pure luck. Rio couldn't imagine the man was an amateur, and Rio was still a child, after all. If he came at Rio for real, their difference in physique would end the match swiftly.

The man slowly closed the distance between them; at this rate, Rio was as good as dead — that he was certain of. But even if he tried to escape, he wouldn't be able to run far with his small body. He was completely cornered.

Then…

Haruto.

An unfamiliar voice echoed in Rio's head. It was the clear, beautiful voice of a girl… yet there was something abnormal about it, something that made the voice sound weak. But suddenly—

"…?"

Rio's eyes widened. A tremendously beautiful peach-haired girl had appeared before his eyes — but it was only for a moment, as she was gone in the next instant. A hallucination? Was he seeing and hearing things? Rio's eyes darted around the room to check, but he couldn't see the girl anywhere. And more importantly… had that girl called him "Haruto"?

A name that no one in this world could have known…

Rio stood there, baffled and unsure of what was happening, when—

Now is… not the time. I'm going to teach you how to use

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

your ode — *or your essence… Remember this feeling*.

Once more, the voice of the phantom girl echoed in his head. So it wasn't a hallucination, Rio thought.

"W-What do you mean 'how to use essence'?!" he shouted back at the voice, grasping at whatever straws he could reach.

He could see the man before him flinch, but Rio didn't have time for him right now.

Sharpen your mind. There should be light… flowing from your body. Use that light to enhance your body… and its physical abilities. Picture it in your head. Don't worry. You can do it… Haruto.

Broken sentences echoed in his head with the girl's voice. It wasn't a very detailed explanation… But in the next moment, Rio's entire body felt like it was being wrapped in a layer of warmth.

Now you can move… past the physical limitations of your body. Have you remembered… the feeling? You have to maintai… sorry, I can't —

The girl's voice cut off completely.

…But Rio was busy being taken aback by the change to his body; just when he thought the light flowing from him had increased, his body suddenly felt lighter. His senses were sharpened — not only had his vision and hearing improved, but a sixth sense he normally couldn't feel had awakened too. It was exactly as the girl had described: the light flowing from him had been used to strengthen his physical abilities and his body. He had been half-doubtful and couldn't understand the logic behind it at all, but he knew it was possible, thanks to the girl's support. Because of that, he now knew the basics. It wouldn't be too hard to maintain this state now, and he could probably do it by himself next time, too. While he still didn't know who the girl was or what the light did, his first priority right now was the killer before him. At this point, approximately ten seconds had passed

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

since Rio dodged the man's knife. The man had been gradually closing the distance that Rio was trying to create, but when Rio came to an abrupt stop, he halted too, and watched Rio suspiciously. Rio gathered all of his fighting will as he observed the masked man. Suddenly, the man changed his words to some kind of spell.

"*Augendae Corporis!*"

Rio's eyes widened as the man's body was momentarily bathed in the light of a geometric circle. The faint light that until now had been leaking from the man's body suddenly increased in volume. It was no match for the amount that was flowing from Rio's body, but it was enough for Rio to be wary of. In the next instant, the assassin closed in on Rio and swung his knife at an inhuman speed.

He fully intended on ending the battle with that one strike, but Rio's tracking ability and reaction speed had been enhanced, making the man's movement appear so slow to Rio's eye. He was able to easily evade the attack. The feeling of his enhanced abilities astonished him; he shifted his torso to the side and the man's knife swiftly slashed through empty space. With his shorter reach, Rio had to take a step forward to hit the man in the stomach with the palm of his hand.

"Gwahah?!"

The strong impact to his abdomen made the man yell in pain. He must have been around 80 kilograms, yet he was easily blown away. The force behind Rio's one attack was unimaginable for a child.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Barely landing on his feet, the man's consciousness nearly slipped away… he couldn't understand what had just happened. Falling to one knee, he stared at Rio in shock. Then, he desperately scrambled back to his feet and stepped towards Rio once more, thrusting the knife forward sluggishly. However, Rio grabbed the man's extended arm by the wrist and twisted it painfully.

"Gah!"

The pain in his wrist caused the man to drop the knife. Rio then toppled the man off-balance and easily threw him to the floor. His physical abilities had really improved. Rio's weak and childish frame could bear a weight that should have been impossible for a child to carry. It was strengthened exactly like the girl had explained earlier. He couldn't feel any burden on his body.

"S-Shit… Damn, brat… What the hell are you…?" he grunted his resentment towards Rio. The man broke his fall with a roll, narrowly avoiding being knocked out.

"Hah… hah…"

Rio gasped for breath where he stood. His heart was still racing as he looked at his own hands in astonishment. After a moment, Rio turned his gaze towards the man glaring at him in the dimly lit room. He could see the look from behind the mask that the man was giving him — it was filled with hatred. Rio wondered what the man was thinking as he stumbled to his trembling feet once more.

He still wants to fight?!

Horror fell over Rio's face. The man should have been covered in injuries by now… he shouldn't have had any stamina left to stand up. So why did he keep trying to? There could only be one answer: the man wanted to kill Rio with his very last breath. Why the man had to go that far, Rio had no idea. He didn't want to know. But if the man was trying to kill Rio, then Rio would—

With an irritated huff, Rio pressed the man's face against

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

the floor.

“Guh…” the man groaned.

Rio climbed onto the man’s back and grabbed his neck with both hands. If he put a little strength into his fingers, he could probably strangle the man to death.

But his hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Even when he tried to squeeze his fingers, they shook.

He couldn’t kill him. He wouldn’t. Even though the man had tried to kill Rio, Rio couldn’t bring himself to kill him. Rio hesitated for a beat, then…

“Damn it!” he yelled, slamming the man’s head against the ground.

The struggling man fell completely still after that. He’d been knocked out. Rio confirmed that the man was unconscious before standing up.

“H-Have to escape…” he muttered.

Rio staggered forward on wobbly legs, then nervously glanced around at his surroundings. How would he explain this situation to anyone? He was nearly frozen with fear. Then, Rio caught sight of the unconscious girl who was still sleeping…

◇◇◇

It was still morning.

Those with proper jobs would have left for them long ago, but barely any of the residents of the slums had proper jobs, so the streets were still deserted. Rio carried the unconscious girl over his shoulder as he dragged his feet through the slums; though he wasn’t injured, his feet still felt heavy. The dress the girl was wearing stood out too much, so he covered her in the sack she was originally in.

How did it end up like this? Why did this have to happen to him? Anger at the unfairness of the situation boiled inside of him, but he didn’t have the time to release it right now.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

He didn't even know where to go. He just continued to walk forward until he eventually approached the entrance of the slums.

"Y-You! Hold it right there!"

The sound of a young girl shouted at him from nearby, but Rio failed to realize she was talking to him and kept walking.

"I'm telling you to stop!" she said, grabbing at Rio forcefully. She seemed to be trying to take the little girl that Rio was carrying.

"Ch-Christina! Please wait!"

"Vanessa, hurry and grab Flora!"

"Y-Yes!"

The one who had called out to Rio was Christina, one of the girls he met at the entrance of the slums earlier. The other three were also here. Their hooded robes were much more plain and shabby compared to before, but the voice and height were definitely the same. Christina pulled the girl she called Flora off of his shoulder angrily.

"Hey you. Let go of Flora, now," Vanessa ordered in a cold voice. Rio relaxed his grip and let her take Flora from his shoulder.

"Flora! Flora!"

Christina desperately cried out the name of the girl in Vanessa's arms.

"Stay calm. She's just passed out. Celia and Roanna — please look after Flora."

Vanessa checked Flora's condition calmly and left her in the care of the other two.

"Y-Yes!"

"Understood!"

Celia and the girl named Roanna both nodded and took Flora into their arms; Rio watched the scene unfolding before him with detached, emotionless eyes.

"Hey, you!" Vanessa shouted, glaring at Rio.

She drew her sword in one smooth motion and pointed it

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

at Rio's neck, but Rio didn't even flinch. He couldn't feel any killing intent behind Vanessa at all, unlike the man who had tried to kill him just now. But Rio wasn't exactly processing the situation in a calm manner. If anything, he had lost interest in everything.

"Explain what happened," Vanessa ordered.

Rio shrugged and tried to walk away without a care. But—

"Hold it!" Christina said as she cut in front of him.

"It's dangerous!" Vanessa shouted in a panic.

But Christina ignored her and slapped Rio's face — hard. The sound of the resulting smack echoed around them, and the shock of the impact returned Rio to the present.

"...Huh?"

A sound of confusion spilled from his lips. He didn't understand... Why was Christina angry? Why had he been slapped when he'd found the girl they were looking for? His cheek throbbed with pain as he stood there, bewildered.

"Don't just stand there in silence. Answer me! You lied to us, didn't you? What were you going to do with Flora?"

Christina released a barrage of accusations at Rio. He really couldn't understand what she was saying...

He could feel something swell up within his throat.

"Huh?"

Rio glared at Christina with an icy gaze.

"...!"

Christina flinched. Her hand moved instinctively and rose up to slap Rio again. But this time, Rio grabbed Christina's hand and stopped her. Christina's cute face twisted in ugly frustration as she raised her other hand instead. Rio's other hand moved to catch it, now holding Christina back with both hands.

"Let go of me! You're disgusting! It stinks!" Christina yelled, but Rio didn't let go.

Then...

"Release her," Vanessa said coldly, once again pointing

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

the sword at Rio's neck.

Rio shot her a glare before slowly releasing her hands. Sure enough, the instant Christina was free, her hand came up once more to slap Rio's face with as much strength as she could muster. Rio followed her movement with his eyes, but did nothing in particular to block it.

"Heh," Rio laughed mockingly.

His smile made Christina's body tremble once more. She was terrified. Having been raised as a princess, Rio's smile held emotions that had never been directed toward her in her life.

"Princess Christina! Please refrain from such provoking actions!"

"He's the one at fault! This is treason!"

"The boy doesn't know that you're royalty. We need to figure out what happened first."

"Then hurry up and arrest him!" Christina screamed angrily, making Vanessa sigh tiredly.

"You heard her. You... Rio, was it? You're coming to the castle with us."

"No," Rio declined, shaking his head.

"This isn't a request. It's an order. You have no right to refuse," Vanessa said, moving the sword pointed at Rio's neck closer.

The tip of the blade was mere millimeters away from his skin, but Rio looked into Vanessa eyes without fear. Vanessa stared back into Rio's eyes as Christina, Celia, and Roanna watched on silently, sensing the tension in the air. Silence continued between them for a moment; in that time, Vanessa pondered in her head:

Is this boy really a child?

She was astonished by Rio nerves. A regular child might have thrown an angry tantrum, burst into tears, or groveled for their life. That would have been a normal reaction. Yet while Rio was rebellious, the way he was looking at the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

clearly advantageous Vanessa was bordering on serenity. A strange chill traveled down Vanessa's spine.

"All I did was save that unconscious girl over there. You can ask her when she wakes up."

"No. I want to hear what you know directly from your mouth."

Vanessa immediately rejected Rio's suggestion. Rio determined that arguing any more than this wouldn't benefit him. Vanessa would only use her authority and strength to forcefully take him to the castle instead. He did have the option of using the power he learned earlier to counterattack them and flee, but there was no guarantee he would win against them, and they already knew his face. Rio would truly become a criminal if he did that, since his opponents were royalty and nobility. That would be the worst possible move he could make…

Rio prepared himself.

"…Just to talk, right?"

"Yeah. If we find that you're innocent, we'll release you. Nothing bad will happen. You can tell us the gist of it while we move."

And that was how a mere orphan like Rio was brought from the slums of the capital to the castle in the center.

Then, several minutes later…

Around the same time that Rio was arriving at the castle, the official search party dispatched by the castle closed in on the crime scene at the wooden shack.

…As did the residents of the slums and other noisy onlookers.

"Sir Alfred! We've found someone that's still alive," a man clad in the knight's uniform of the Royal Guard exclaimed as he burst out of the wooden shack.

"Arrest him and bring him here. He could be one of the kidnappers."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Alfred Emerle — a man in his late twenties — ordered. He wore an extravagant cloak over the top of his knight's uniform. A certain individual watched this conversation unfold while remaining hidden among the onlookers. They wore a black robe covering his whole body, hiding their appearance, age, and gender.

Just then, the captured suspect was dragged out of the shack. It was the man who had attacked Rio earlier. His mask had been removed, revealing his true face underneath. He was awake, but grimacing in pain from the damage he'd received in the fight earlier.

"This… might be bad," the robed figured muttered after seeing the state of the man.

Judging from the voice, the person was male. His expression was hidden under the darkness of his hood, but the tone of his voice showed no panic, despite his words.

"…It can't be helped."

With a small sigh, the man took out a jewel from his breast pocket and crushed it between his fingers without hesitation.

Then…

"…Ah… gah!"

As soon as the gem crumbled to pieces, the restrained man cried out in pain. His body gave a single shudder before he dropped dead.

"H-Hey!"

The knight supporting the man panicked.

"What's wrong?" Alfred asked, noticing that something was wrong.

"H-He's dead." The knight confirmed the man's condition before informing him.

"What?" Alfred said, raising his eyebrows.

Hidden among the onlookers, the robed man looked on in satisfaction.

"Perfect timing. Mission accomplished… time to go

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

home.”

And with those words, he left the scene.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Chapter 3: False Accusation

Rio was taken into custody in an interrogation room on the lowest floor of the castle.

“Please wait here. An investigator will be with you shortly,” the soldier who escorted him to the room said before leaving the room, door lock clicking shut behind him.

Rio looked around. There were no windows in the interrogation room, only a wooden table and chair placed in the center. A truly bleak scene to behold. The only way in or out of the room was through the single door, which locked from the outside. Once the door was locked, it was a completely closed room.

“Guess they don’t trust me much,” Rio muttered, unamused at his current situation. For the record, Vanessa and the others had rushed away with Flora the moment they handed Rio over to the escorting soldier. He had given them a simple rundown on what happened on the way here, but they’d probably keep him in custody as a primary witness until Flora woke up and confirmed the truth. In the meantime, they’d conduct an official investigation to record his account of events. They wasted no time at all, which made perfect sense. Considering their respective positions and relationships, this kind of treatment was to be expected. Rio could understand that. But if he was being honest with himself, being in custody wasn’t all that fun.

Perhaps it would’ve been better if he hadn’t saved Flora.

Then he wouldn’t get treated like this now… He hadn’t done anything wrong, yet he was under suspicion and locked away like a criminal — all as a result of being unable to abandon the unconscious girl and carrying her outside. This

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

world was unfair: kindness was shown to the strong, while the weak were defined by irrational rules. Even though he should've known that already... Rio heaved a sigh filled with all his frustrations and moved to sit in one of the shabby chairs, which was far from what could be called comfortable. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes with a frown. He had no information, no leads on his future, and no way to change this situation just by thinking about it.

So... he decided to relax as he waited instead.

Soon after his heart had calmed down, the sound of the lock turning could be heard. Then, the door opened, and three men appeared. They were all wearing the knight's uniform of the Royal Guard, but the man in front, who looked to be in his late twenties, had an especially ornate design embroidered on his. His facial features were well proportioned, but there was something pretentious about the scornful way he looked at Rio. The lavish knight shot Rio a glance before immediately opening his mouth.

"I am Charles Arbor, deputy commander of the Royal Guard and the investigator for your case. We're going to ask you a few questions; if you want to be released quickly, then answer honestly," he ordered with an air of superiority.

Rio furrowed his brow as Charles sat down in the seat opposite him.

"Are you the one who kidnapped Her Highness, the Second Princess?" he asked as he flipped through some documents. He didn't seem to care for Rio's feelings at all.

The knight who was serving as the transcriber sat next to Charles and began to record his testimony. The remaining knight stood intimidatingly next to Rio.

"...No, I'm not," Rio answered bluntly, feeling a little bitter at Charles' arrogant attitude.

"Then where did you find the Second Princess?"

"In a wooden shack in the slums. She was stuffed inside a sack."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Why were you there?”

“The people who raised me lived in that shack.”

“According to the report, they were the ones who took the Second Princess prisoner. Is that true?”

“Seems so. I saw them come back carrying the sack with the princess inside.”

And so, the investigation continued. All of it was information he’d already told Vanessa on the way to the castle. The documents in Charles’ hand probably contained all of that intelligence so that he could cross-check for any inconsistencies as they proceeded with the investigation. There were parts of his testimony that put Rio in an unfavorable position, but it was all information that could be clarified with a thorough search. It would have been worse if Rio lied and lost track of the actual facts, so he decided to answer as honestly as possible.

“So you’re saying you weren’t involved in the kidnapping of Her Highness, the Second Princess?” Charles asked doubtfully.

“That’s right,” Rio confirmed without hesitation.

“Hmm… how suspicious,” Charles noted. “According to the report, the thugs that tyrannized you were killed by a masked man of unknown origins. So why are you the only one alive?”

“He was defeated.”

“By who?”

“By me.”

Charles scoffed at Rio’s answer.

“Don’t lie to me. A little kid like you defeating a bandit? Impossible. He would’ve gone through some form of training.”

“I don’t know, maybe he let his guard down? I was so frantic at the time, I don’t even know what happened…”

Rio chose not to tell them about how he had enhanced his own body.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Hmm. Fine. Where is that man now, then?”

“Who knows? If he hasn’t woken up and fled, then he should still be lying somewhere among the corpses in the shack,” Rio replied in a rather fed-up tone.

“Our search party is at that shack right this moment. Their report should arrive shortly. If it’s as you say, then we may be able to extract some information from that man…”

Just as Charles finished speaking, a knock echoed from the door.

“Seems like it’s here. Open it.”

At Charles’ order, one of the knights opened the door, and another knight entered the room.

“Excuse me. Here is the report from the search team, Sir Charles,” the knight said, leaning in to whisper something to Charles’ ear. Charles stared silently at Rio as he listened to the report. Rio watched on in silence, too. Several moments later, Charles scowled unhappily at the report he’d finished listening to.

“…It seems like we have to relocate. Stand up,” he ordered Rio.

“Why do we have to relocate?”

“To do the interrogation, obviously.”

“Then why can’t we do it here?”

Charles’ vague answer left Rio extremely puzzled. He couldn’t understand why they had to leave the interrogation room to do an interrogation.

“Just stand up! We don’t have time!” Charles shouted menacingly. The other knights grabbed Rio by an arm each and moved to life him out of his seat.

“I can stand by myself,” Rio said with a sulky expression.

He got up quickly and tried to shake off the knights that had him by the arms, but they seemed to have no intention of releasing him, as their vice-like grip didn’t budge at all.

“I’m not going to run, so could you let go of me?” Rio asked Charles, who was still sitting before him.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Hmm, let’s see…” Charles stood up abruptly and made his way over to Rio. “Stick out his hands,” he ordered the knights restraining Rio.

“Yes sir,” the knights replied promptly, forcing Rio to put out his hands.

“Hey, stop it!” Rio tried to fight them off, but his child’s strength was no match against these adults. He might’ve been able to throw them off easily if he had strengthened his physical body and abilities like in the battle before, but the situation moved too quickly for him to react calmly. And even if he did manage to shake off Charles and the other knights, it would probably be considered obstruction and make him a criminal for real. Which meant that if Rio had acted calmly and enhanced his body, he was unlikely to escape successfully anyway. Rio struggled with all his might, but the adults held him still with ease.

Charles chose that moment to make a move. *Clink!* A jangling sound echoed throughout the room.

“Huh?” Rio looked at his hands in shock. Cuffed around his wrists were a pair of shackles and a long chain leading away from it; a knight held the end of the chain to prevent Rio from running away.

“Let’s hurry. Bring the brat along,” Charles said to a confused Rio, who still hadn’t caught up with the situation.

◇◇◇

Tugged forward by the chain, Rio was led to a damp and humid dungeon. The air in the room was chilly against his skin. There was a lantern against the wall giving off faint light, but for some strange reason the light source didn’t appear to be fire. There had been several similar lanterns in the interrogation room earlier, but there was only the one in this room, leaving it rather dim. The entryway consisted of a sturdy metal door and there was a bed placed in the corner

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

of the room. Both the floor and the ceiling were entirely made of stone, implying absolutely no regard for the inhabitant's comfort. On top of that, there were several restraining tools set in the room along a stained wall with patches of different color — probably from blood. It was exceedingly easy to imagine what this room was for: a prison cell dedicated to what was most likely interrogation by torture. That's what Rio deduced.

"Hey, what are you throwing me into a cell for?" he demanded, no longer bothering to soften his words out of resentment.

"You're the suspected culprit behind the kidnapping case of the Second Princess. We need to take you into custody for the interrogation, obviously."

"I did no such thing!" Rio replied angrily. He could understand being called the primary witness, but having the crime placed on his head was a different matter entirely.

"That's what all the suspects say," Charles scoffed, dismissing Rio carelessly.

"This is ridicu — ugh…" Rio tried to voice his complaints, but the chain hanging from his shackles was yanked hard, throwing him off-balance and sending him toppling to the ground. Charles looked down at him.

"I have determined that you are deeply involved with the kidnapping of Her Highness, the Second Princess. Therefore, an interrogation will now be conducted. You have no right to remain silent. Answer the questions truthfully — refusing to answer will only bring you pain," the knight explained.

"Piss… off…"

Rio had almost fallen speechless from astonishment, but the rage within him burst forth as he glared at Charles.

"Hmm… What rebellious eyes. Typical of a criminal with no morals, I'd say."

Charles heaved an exaggerated sigh of exasperation, a

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

mocking action filled with sarcasm. It made it unclear whether he was being his honest self or intentionally provoking Rio.

"I suppose we'll have to teach you your place first. Do it."

Charles gestured with his head, prompting the knights to move. One knight yanked the chain from Rio's shackles up to the pulley hanging from the roof and started to adjust the height for him.

"Hey, stop it!" Rio protested, but the knight continued to work. He strung Rio's hands upward until his feet could just barely touch the ground, placing all of his body weight on his wrists.

Despite his weight being that of a child, it was still quite a burden on his joints.

Rio's face twisted in pain as Charles huffed smugly. He held in his hands a wooden club that he had picked up at some point.

"I don't want to do this the hard way, either. If you're cooperative with the interrogation, I can release you right now. First, acknowledge your participation in the kidnapping case of the Second Princess. What do you say?" Charles offered, caressing Rio's cheek with the end of the club.

Enduring the pain in his wrists, Rio gritted his teeth. "No thanks," he said. "I did… no such thing."

He shot down Charles' proposal.

"Are you *sure*?"

Rio replied with silence. Charles then swung the club in his hands into Rio's abdomen.

"Gah! Hah…"

A groan slipped from Rio's mouth. Charles gently brushed the club against the stomach area he had just hit.

"You were involved in the kidnapping of the Second Princess. Isn't that right?" he asked once again.

"I… did no… such thing…!"

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Fool.”

Charles heaved another dramatic sigh, before leaning into Rio’s ear.

“You’re going to regret that,” he whispered coldly.

◇◇◇

Meanwhile, on the upper floors of the Beltrum Royal Castle, in Flora’s bedroom…

“*Zzz… zzz…*”

The Second Princess, Flora Beltrum, slept peacefully in a luxurious four-poster bed. A gentle spring breeze blew into the room through her balcony, which overlooked the scenery of Beltrant, the capital.

“*Reveles*.”

Celia chanted the spell for detection, and a circle of light appeared at her hand. She closed her eyes, moved her hands over Flora’s body, and focused her mind. After a moment, Celia opened her eyes and exhaled in relief.

“There are no traces of any sorcery being cast. Medicine is outside my area of expertise, but I’d say she’ll recover quickly with enough water and rest.”

Vanessa sighed with relief after Celia reported her diagnosis.

“Thank you, Celia. If your *Reveles* couldn’t find anything, then Princess Flora is surely safe from any possible curses,” Vanessa said, bowing her head at Celia.

“No, I’m glad I was able to help. Now we can all rest easy.”

“Yes, but we never found out what the culprit wanted to achieve from the kidnapping…” Vanessa said.

“I think the information we received from Rio will be useful. We may be able to identify the culprit from that.”

“…If what that boy said was true, that is,” Vanessa added.

“You think he was lying?” Celia asked with wide eyes.

“No… Of course, that might not be the case. It’s just an

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

occupational hazard of mine to doubt everything."

"Well, I don't believe he's a bad child."

"I guess if a professor at the Royal Academy says so, then it must be true," Vanessa said with a small smile.

"I'm still a newbie, though," Celia replied bashfully. Then, she noticed something, and asked, "Come to think of it, where did Princess Christina and Roanna go?"

"Oh. They're probably being scolded for abuse of power and leaving without permission by His Majesty right about now…" Vanessa answered tiredly.

Just then, Flora stirred.

"Uhh… Mmh…"

"Princess Flora!" Vanessa called in a panicked voice.

Flora opened her eyes slowly. She blinked a few times before looking up at Vanessa's face in a daze.

"Is that… Vanessa? Where…"

"You're in your bedroom, Your Highness. You were weakened from dehydration and it caused you to pass out. Please, drink this."

Vanessa picked up a metal jug from the table and poured water into a glass to offer to Flora.

"Thank you." Flora accepted the glass and sipped slowly from it. After a moment, she lowered it and noticed Celia watching her.

"Oh, umm. Who might you be?" Flora asked.

"My name is Celia Claire, Your Highness. I am Princess Christina's class instructor at the Royal Academy."

"You're my sister's… I've heard a lot about you."

"I'm honored."

Celia bowed respectfully as Flora gave a weak smile.

"Would you explain what happened to me? I don't…"

"Yes. Please allow me that honor, Your Highness," Vanessa said, and began explaining the situation to Flora. She spent the next few minutes giving Flora the general outline of what happened.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“ —which brings us here. The boy claimed he was merely protecting Your Highness. Is this true?” Vanessa asked Flora after finishing her explanation.

“Yes. I faintly remember asking a child my age to save me,” Flora confirmed with a nod.

“And that boy’s name was Rio?”

“…I’m sorry. I didn’t ask for his name, so I don’t know,” Flora shook her head, eyes downcast. “But I’ll know his face when I see him. Where is he now? I want to thank him.”

“…He’s probably being interrogated right now,” Vanessa replied.

“Interrogated? Why?” Flora asked curiously.

“There was a need to confirm whether the boy’s statement was true, so…”

“Then please bring him here. He’s the one who saved me.”

Flora declared Rio’s innocence and made her request, but Vanessa seemed troubled as she looked down.

“That’s… I’m afraid it’s a little difficult to call him to this room.”

“Why?”

“The boy is a mere orphan. He’ll need to be cleaned up and receive permission from His Majesty first…”

“…Then please do that quickly,” Flora requested rather forcefully. “I won’t allow him any more discomfort.”

“Understood. Please rest some more, Your Highness. It will be better for your health.”

“I know. Please do as I asked.”

“Of course. Celia, could you please keep Her Highness company for a moment? I need to get some things ready.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Thank you. I shall return as soon as possible.”

Vanessa extended her thanks at Celia’s agreeable nod before hurrying off to find Rio.

◇◇◇

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Rio was exhausted. The shackles digging into his wrists had torn the skin apart, but he could no longer feel pain. Rather, his whole body had been so bruised by the club, he could no longer feel the pain in his wrists.

“You damn brat! Spit out the kidnapper’s details already!” Charles’ angry yells echoed through the cell; a layer of impatience could be heard underneath all of the rage. Rio had noticed that too, though he didn’t know the reason for it. Once he realized how flustered the other party was, though, he was able to keep his own thoughts rather calm.

But the situation was still bad.

Ever since he arrived in the second interrogation room, he’d been beaten and bruised in an attempt to coerce a false confession out of him. They wouldn’t let him pass out and find peace. He had barely any stamina left, and was only holding on through pure will and stubbornness.

In an attempt to reduce the physical damage he had to suffer, he tried to strengthen his body.

He could remember the feeling of that moment quite vividly… He should’ve been able to reproduce it easily if he concentrated, yet for some reason, Rio couldn’t enhance his body.

It was because of the shackles that restrained him.

Sorcery had been cast on them to seal the magic essence of whoever wore them. Rio didn’t know anything about essence or sorcery, but he knew the physical enhancement he did in his previous fight used essence as the source of energy. With the shackles preventing his magic essence from flowing out of his body, he couldn’t perform the physical enhancement.

Even so, Rio kept waiting for a chance without giving up.

There had to be a reason why Charles was impatiently trying to force a confession out of Rio. It was easy to assume that if Rio confessed here, the situation would only benefit Charles… That’s why Rio hardened his resolve. He

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

absolutely wouldn't give in to this violence and confess to a crime he didn't commit.

"I don't have anything else to tell you."

"You brat!"

Charles swung the club with all his pent-up frustration. It was a merciless blow to the face.

"Guh…!"

Blood started pouring from Rio's nose.

"D-Deputy commander! He may die if you go overboard…"

One of the knights that had been silently watching the interrogation tried to hold Charles back in a panic.

"Silence! My position is in danger right now!" Charles shouted hysterically.

"B-But sir! Your position will be in worse shape if you kill him of your own accord. We're treading on thin ice as is."

"Then what would you have me do? Fear of taking a risk will bring no reward in this situation! If I don't regain my honorable standing here, I'm taking you all down with me!" Charles yelled. Silence fell over the room.

All the knights present in the room were part of the Royal Guard, and they were all knights in danger of losing their position due to Flora's kidnapping case.

The uproar from Flora's kidnapping case all started yesterday.

The royal family of Beltrum held a ritual every spring to pray for the prosperity of the kingdom. Flora was appointed the vital role as the priestess in charge of performing that ritual. By tradition, a purification ceremony was conducted before the ritual. In order to do that, Flora had to visit a spring on ancient holy land in the outskirts of the capital. However, it was forbidden for anyone other than the priestess and her attendant to enter the holy land during the ceremony. This time, though — the custom ended up backfiring. The Royal Guard surrounded the holy land with

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

heavy security, but the spring was located in a forest and the kidnapper managed to slip through the cracks of their security. Flora's kidnapping was the fault of the Royal Guard in charge of the security on site and the knights at the center of the security — in other words, the members gathered in the cell with Rio. At this very moment, Charles was in danger of losing his position as deputy commander of the Royal Guard. Fearing that outcome, he was now desperate to recover his disgraced honor, and had forcibly taken over Rio's interrogation from the investigator that Vanessa had assigned — to force the interrogation in his favor. He was prepared to twist the truth with a small false accusation or two if it came to that…

All in order to lighten his punishment as much as possible.

Since confessions were considered to be irrefutable evidence under Beltrum's justice system, an admission would be enough proof to sentence the crime. If Charles could make Rio give testimony that was favorable for the knights during the interrogation and repeat that in front of the King before his verdict, then his guilt would be proved. Even if Flora woke up and testified that Rio had saved her, there would be no overturning Rio's guilty sentence. This was how strongly confessions were considered as evidence. Rio was a seven-year-old child — with a little pain and fear, he'd easily bend his confession to their will, Charles thought.

However, Rio showed more endurance and courage than he expected, greatly derailing his plans. Normally, an interrogation had no time limit… but this case was different. The battle was against Flora's awakening. Should Flora confirm that Rio was the one who saved her, Rio would become her savior, the crime would still be unsolved, and Charles would no longer be able to interrogate him through torture. If that happened, the only fact left would be that Charles forcefully tortured the savior of the royal family,

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

making his situation take a turn for the worse, rather than the better.

That was why he was feeling extremely impatient. Flora could wake up at any moment now, and it would only be a matter of time before they discover the interrogation taking place in this room.

He had to get Rio to confess before then, no matter what it took.

"...Bring me the Collar of Submission," Charles ordered in a low voice.

The surrounding knights all widened their eyes in surprise. "I-It's a felony to use the Collar of Submission on a suspect without permission!" one of the other knights stammered.

The Collar of Submission was a magic artifact that bound the free will of the wearer and compelled them to obey the orders of their registered owner. If the wearer rebelled against the order, the owner could chant a phrase to inflict sharp pain upon the wearer's body. Furthermore, because the artifact had a history of being abused for malicious intentions, there were strict national laws imposed around its usage. Such laws included the wearer being limited to either slaves or criminals, and its actual use had to be reported to the government.

Charles, having lost his rational mind, was going against protocol.

"Silence! Shut up and do as I—"

Just as Charles yelled angrily, the door to the underground room slammed open. Startled, all the knights in the room whirled to face it. In the open doorway stood Vanessa Emerle, the female knight that escorted Rio to the castle. She took in the state of the room and furrowed her brow.

"What do you think you're doing, Lord Arbor?" she asked in a furious voice.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

"…An official interrogation by the authority of the deputy commander of the Royal Guard." Charles nearly stumbled over his words, but he answered immediately, his reply bold and calculated.

"I assigned one of my own subordinates to the investigation," Vanessa objected.

"That person had a mission arise. I was available and took over instead."

"…Why was there a need for the deputy commander of the Royal Guard to personally take over this investigation?"

"That's because this investigation is partially my fault. I felt a sense of duty over it. Is there a problem with that?" Charles asked nonchalantly.

"I believe I sent a message for the boy to be treated gently, as there was a possibility he was Princess Flora's savior." Vanessa looked over at Rio hanging suspended in the air.

"Hmph. Something like that may have been mentioned. However, I highly suspect that this boy is deeply involved with Her Highness' kidnapping," Charles said, feigning ignorance.

"Do you have proof of any crimes outside of his statement?"

"I merely deduced it from the circumstantial evidence. The possibility exists, wouldn't you say?"

"…True, but shouldn't you have waited until Princess Flora woke up?" Vanessa inquired.

"We'll agree to disagree there. Or are you saying I can't be rough against Her Highness' savior? That will only make the truth more difficult to uncover."

It was just one excuse after another. *He sure knows how to talk in circles*, Vanessa thought.

"…Well, it seems like he's Princess Flora's savior after all. Did you find any connection to the kidnapping?"

"Fortunately, he seems uninvolved. His Majesty would have been most upset if she were to find that Her Highness'

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

savior was a criminal, after all. *Oh*, what a blessing," Charles said dramatically with exaggerated delight.

Vanessa had quite a few things she wanted to respond with, but questioning him here any further would only lead to more evasive excuses. She'd have to send a written report to the higher-ups later — they could handle it instead.

"Then I'd like you to stop the interrogation here. Princess Flora's savior should not be treated so rudely. His Majesty wanted to meet him as well."

"In that case, I will gladly step down here. Hey. Remove the shackles," Charles ordered. The knights hurried to remove Rio's shackles. With no energy to remain standing, the boy fell to the ground.

"We'll be taking our leave now. I have other things to do, after all."

With those words, Charles and the other knights left the dungeons hastily. The only ones left behind were Rio and Vanessa.

"...My apologies. I'll call a sorcerer who can use *Cura* immediately," Vanessa said as she approached Rio, who was lying face down. "Can you stand?"

Rio ignored Vanessa's voice and tried to rise on his own.

"Ugh..."

Intense pain ran throughout his body, causing Rio to fall instantly to the ground again.

"Don't push yourself. Your bones might be fractured. I'll carry you, just stay still—" Vanessa said, reaching out to Rio with a careful hand.

"Don't... touch me..." Rio slapped the hand away.

Vanessa paused, staring at her hand in shock.

"Umm. I'm sorry. I'll call a healer here, so just stay put." With a conflicted expression on her face, Vanessa left the dungeon.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 4: Royal Academy Enrollment

Vanessa summoned Celia down to the dungeon where Rio was interrogated. He was probably on extremely high guard right now, so she chose to bring someone familiar rather than a complete stranger. That being said, out of the few faces Rio knew presently, the only one he was less wary of and with healing magic was Celia. She gladly agreed to travel down into the dungeon.

“Umm, he seems to have passed out,” Celia pointed out.

Rio had fallen unconscious, having long surpassed his physical and mental limits.

“He was probably too fatigued from the pain and stress.” Vanessa’s expression darkened solemnly.

“Ugh…” A groan fell from Rio’s mouth.

“…What awful injuries. His whole body is battered and bruised. There may even be fractures in his bones… He needs to be treated immediately,” Celia said, gently removing the clothes from Rio’s upper body in order to examine him.

“I implore you. …It seemed like Sir Arbor abused him horribly during the interrogation.”

“What an awful man, doing this to such a small child. He could have just questioned him traditionally.”

“I suspect the interrogation was just a front. His position in the Royal Guard was at risk due to this case. He became desperate to turn the tide in his favor in any way possible,” Vanessa explained.

“…How terrible,” Celia muttered with a frown. “Those

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

types of men never know when to back down."

"I couldn't agree more. Especially so in the case of nobles," Vanessa agreed with a bitter smile.

"Well… I'm going to start healing now. *Cura*."

Having finished her examination of Rio's condition, Celia chanted the phrase used for a healing spell. A geometric magic circle appeared at her hands, and a gentle light wrapped around Rio's body, healing his injuries.

Vanessa watched in awe as the swelling faded before her eyes. "Amazing. I knew the healing effect varied depending on the user, but even in the royal court there are barely any sorcerers with *Cura* this impressive."

"…I'm flattered," Celia said with a shy nod. She then took a deep breath and focused harder.

Once the healing was done, she canceled her magic.

"He should be healed enough to move now… but he's fallen asleep. I can continue after he's been carried to a bed — he needs proper rest."

"There are several scars over his body, but… these must be old wounds. Was he mistreated while he was in the slums?" Vanessa asked upon spotting Rio's old scars.

"Yes, most likely. They do seem like those kinds of wounds."

"And there's no way to remove them?"

"I'm sorry. It would be one thing if it was right after he was injured, but it's impossible to restore old skin once time has passed."

"I see…"

Both of their expressions fell somber.

"Shall we carry him to the guest room?"

"Yes, let's."

Thus, Rio was relocated once more, this time while he was unconscious.

◇◇◇

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Rio woke up on a soft bed in the guest room of the royal castle.

“Mm…”

He lifted his eyelids slowly — an unfamiliar ceiling came into view.

Where…

Rio turned his head from side to side, blinking sleepily at the interior of the spacious and beautiful room. The ceiling was high and there was expensive-looking furniture placed at every corner, creating a luxuriously elegant space.

It was vastly different from the utter despair he felt in the prison cell in the suffocating dungeon.

Rio tried to sit upright in bed to take in his surroundings in more detail, but his body felt strangely dull and sluggish. He gave up on that plan quickly and fell back against the bed once more.

“Oh, you’re awake now. Good morning — how do you feel?” a hesitant female voice addressed him from beside the bed.

Rio turned towards the source of the voice to see two girls sitting on a leather couch. They appeared to be in their early teens, roughly. One was a small-sized girl wearing quaint clothing of nobility, appearing like an adorable winter fairy with her long white hair reaching softly down her back. The other girl had short blonde hair, her facial features young but carved with a sculpture-like beauty. She was wearing what could be considered a maid uniform. The white and navy colors of the outfit gave it a high-class aura.

Apparently, the two beautiful girls had been having tea next to Rio while he slept.

“You have to rest some more. Your wounds have been healed by magic, but that doesn’t restore weakened stamina. And because the magic pushes your body to heal the wounds forcibly, the restored areas will be very sensitive afterwards,” the white-haired girl explained as she stood up and

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

approached Rio.

“Umm… Who are you?” Rio asked with caution from where he lay in bed.

“I’m Celia, Celia Claire. We talked a little in the slums, remember? I was wearing a hood at that time, though.”

“Oh, you’re the one…”

It was a familiar voice, now that he thought about it. Soft on the ears in a warm and kind way. Rio immediately recognized Celia as the small figure from before.

“Hehe. Pleased to meet you. As for this girl over here—”

Celia turned back and the maid girl behind her began to introduce herself.

“Greetings. My name is Aria Governess. My position in the royal castle is that of the head servant, but in lieu of what has happened, I have been assigned to tend to you. I do hope we can get along amicably.”

The girl who introduced herself as Aria bowed politely. Her tone had been all business and completely monotone, but her words were respectful and caused no discomfort to the listener. “My name is Rio… nice to meet you too.”

Rio returned her greeting politely, awkwardly trying to mimic her speaking style. When someone spoke to him with politeness, he would respond politely in turn. That was Rio’s — no, Amakawa Haruto’s — way of life.

“Umm, where am I?” Rio asked hesitantly.

“The guest room of the castle. You were unconscious, so we healed you with magic and carried you here,” Celia explained with a soft smile.

“Is that so… Thank you very much,” Rio said with a conflicted expression. He couldn’t let his guard down as long as the two people before him were affiliated with the same kingdom that hurt him. The memory of the nightmare in the dungeon stung painfully, but that didn’t change the fact these people helped him.

“It’s fine. I heard about what happened. If anything, we’re

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

the ones who should apologize to you. I'm sorry you were treated so horribly," Celia apologized sorrowfully, lowering her head.

Rio couldn't feel any sense of discrimination towards his orphan status when interacting with her... He remembered how Celia had been the only one that treated him kindly back when they first met in the slums.

To be honest, Rio had a deep-set hatred towards royalty and nobility. Most of the royals and nobles he had met until now were arrogant and overbearing, making it hard to change his biased view of those in privileged positions.

However, people like Celia existed among them. That thought alone made Rio reconsider his unconditional hatred towards the upper class.

"It wasn't your fault," Rio said as he looked down, holding back his emotions.

"But still..." Celia trailed off, unable to express herself. Like Rio had said, it wasn't Celia's fault that Rio had been treated badly. But as someone on the same side as the kingdom that was responsible for what had happened to him, she couldn't help but feel guilty about Rio's unjust treatment.

"More importantly... what's going to happen to me from here?" Rio asked.

"You'll have an audience with His Majesty tomorrow, but I don't know what will happen after that. You saved Princess Flora — Her Highness, the Second Princess — so as her savior, I doubt anything bad will happen..."

"I have to meet the king?"

"Yes. His Majesty wants to thank you officially for what happened."

Rio's brow furrowed slightly at Celia's explanation. Frankly speaking, Rio wanted to put the castle behind him already. An audience with the king was the last thing he wanted to do. But since he was already here in the castle,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

and the other party was the ruler of the kingdom… There was no way he could refuse.

Understanding and accepting his fate in that moment, Rio sighed heavily.

“I didn’t really do anything impressive…”

“That’s not true. Princess Flora asked a lot of you, didn’t she? I’m sure you will be rewarded for it. I understand it might feel like a burden, but it’d be better to accept whatever you’re offered. Don’t you agree, Aria?”

Celia prompted a response from the silent Aria behind her.

“…Yes, that is correct. Your sentiment is to be expected, but it would be difficult to cast a refusal in this situation. Considering the predicament you are in, you should approach this as optimistically as possible,” she stated flatly.

“I see. That might be true.” Rio gave a small smile in resignation.

Celia and Aria widened their eyes at his mature smile; it didn’t match his apparent age.

“Sorry to have to ask this, but could you teach me the etiquette of a royal audience? Like… the proper actions to do and speech to use. I should probably avoid meeting the king with no knowledge at all,” Rio requested, bowing his head.

“Yes, of course.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Celia and Aria readily agreed with Rio’s request.

◇◇◇

Meanwhile, in the Beltrum castle, somewhere in the throne room…

His Majesty, King Philip Beltrum — also known as Philip III — sat on his throne before a gathering of nobles. They were all influential figures involved with the kingdom’s affairs; those present were split into three factions, each

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

grouped together on their own side of the room. In front of the throne and to the right was Duke Arbor's faction, the largest faction of the three. To the left was Duke Huguenot's faction, the second biggest, and lastly, Duke Fontaine's faction, the smallest of the three.

There are some basic points to take note of the current political scenery and power balance in the kingdom of Beltrum:

First, the king of Beltrum was a young and newly crowned king still in his late twenties. Unfortunately, this had allowed Duke Arbor to use his authority and make calculated maneuvers to benefit himself when the previous king passed away from an illness. He had trusted Duke Arbor, conferring upon him the right to appoint knights into the Royal Guard. However, once the king was on his deathbed, Duke Arbor abused this right and sold favors to powerful nobles with sons that were not in line to inherit a position into the knighthood. As a result, Duke Arbor attained an enormous amount of influence over the king's court from his position as commander of the Royal Guard. In contrast, Duke Huguenot and Duke Fontaine had gained their ranks around the same time that Philip III assumed the throne, putting them one step behind and constantly suffering the consequences for it. With his influential power over both the military and the court's administration, Duke Arbor was a thorn in the side of not only Philip III, but the factions of Duke Huguenot and Duke Fontaine as well. As time passed, Duke Arbor's elevated status made his arrogance grow into near insolence — though that may have been his true self coming to light — which caused his rise in power to be viewed as problematic in recent years.

This was the political climate at the time of Flora's kidnapping case.

It was the duty of the Royal Guard to protect the royal family, and they had allowed the Second Princess to be

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

abducted. As the commander of the Royal Guard, and because the man in charge of security at the time was Charles — his son — Duke Arbor could not overlook such catastrophic failure. Ultimately, the responsibility fell on Duke Arbor as his supervisor.

In other words, it was the perfect opportunity to pin the blame on Duke Arbor.

“Perhaps this incident is a sign that the quality of the Royal Guard has decayed,” Duke Huguenot suggested coldly. In agreement with him was Marquess Rodan, a member of his faction.

“Exactly. I can only imagine how lenient they must have been to allow such lowlifes to get through.”

“The security… was flawless,” Duke Arbor tried to justify with a wince, but there was nothing to be said that could excuse such a failure.

“Flawless security is meaningless without the desired results. Fortunately, Princess Flora was unharmed this time, but how do you intend on taking responsibility for this situation?” Duke Huguenot continued pressing with a cool expression.

“…Neither the mastermind behind the kidnapping nor their headquarters have been discovered yet. I believe responsibility can be discussed after that happens,” Duke Arbor answered through gritted teeth. But Duke Huguenot pounced on him like the cat that ate the canary, clearly in his element. “What are you saying? Why not discuss it here and now instead?” Duke Huguenot objected.

“I agree,” concurred Marquess Rodan. “The investigation can be done without the Royal Guard, especially when the current Royal Guard allowed the kidnapping to occur in the first place.” Duke Arbor watched the two nobles, who were nearly half his age, with a weary grimace on his face.

These youngsters… He cursed in his mind.

“They have a valid point, Helmut,” Philip III said after

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

watching the discussion take place, silently — until now. Helmut was Duke Arbor's first name.

"Y-Your Majesty…" Duke Arbor faltered. His face had gone pale.

"There have been concerns that the Royal Guard has declined in quality as of late. With this current incident in mind, it may be time for a rehabilitation of the Royal Guard." The members of Duke Huguenot's faction nodded approvingly at the king's words; Duke Fontaine's faction wore similar expressions of agreement.

"Your right to appoint knights into the Royal Guard is hereby revoked, Helmut. You shall resign from your position as commander. Charles shall be demoted for his involvement as the on-site supervisor. This will leave the position of commander and deputy commander open; thus, Alfred Emerle shall assume the position of commander."

Philip III declared the details of the punishment. While it was difficult to revoke privileges bestowed by a previous king without justification, it was a different story in the face of such failure. The kidnapping of his daughter was unforgivable, of course… but the case itself had turned out rather fortuitous.

"Tch…" Duke Arbor couldn't help from scowling. He had toiled away, building his family's reputation, only to see it crumble away in an instant. It wouldn't have been unusual for him to throw a fit, but as a great lord with a long militaristic history, Duke Arbor concealed his emotions behind a smile and immediately thanked the king.

"As you wish, Your Majesty." He noticed Duke Huguenot's smiling smugly to the side and felt a dark emotion swell up within him. Even then, Duke Arbor's own smile did not wane.

They wouldn't be laughing for long. He'd surely recover from this… And when he did, he'd pay them back twofold the humiliation he had to suffer — and he'd never forgive the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

culprit behind this incident.

Duke Arbor vowed this to himself, deep within his heart.

He suspected the mastermind behind this case was from either one of the opposing factions, but it was hard to imagine that the devoutly loyal Duke Fontaine would kidnap the princess. The more likely answer was Duke Huguenot.

But even if that were true, Huguenot wouldn't show his true colors easily, and there was no decisive evidence. Their only source of useful information — the assassin man — was dead. He also had his suspicions about the boy named Rio, who just happened to be at the scene of the crime, but Duke Huguenot hadn't shown any signs of concern over him. Arbor's conclusion was that the boy might actually be unrelated to the case.

It wouldn't hurt to take some cautionary steps, though.

"Your Majesty, what do you intend on doing with the orphan named Rio?" Duke Arbor asked, focusing on Duke Huguenot's reaction.

"Hmm. He may be a valuable primary witness to the incident, but Flora owes her life to him. No matter his status as an orphan, he deserves to be shown gratitude. I am thinking of giving him some reward."

"Couldn't that be a dangerous move? There's no guarantee he isn't associated with an outside power."

"Oh? I heard your son was more than thorough with his investigation. Don't tell me you intend on torturing him further for a confession when you don't even have clear evidence?" Philip III asked, narrowing his eyes.

"I am not suggesting to enact torture on Her Highness' savior, of course. But the fact is — there is no proof of his innocence, either." The king frowned at Duke Arbor's roundabout way of conversing.

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Your Majesty, I humbly believe it would be best to keep him under surveillance for a while."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Hmm. The same thought crossed my mind. Indebted as I am to him over Flora’s incident, I suppose it is necessary, though reluctant as I am… Garcia.”

The king looked over at Duke Fontaine’s faction.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” An elderly man said, stepping forward from the back of the group. He stood straight-backed and had a gentle face at first glance, but the other members cleared a path for him in an almost nervous manner.

His name was Garcia Fontaine. Although he was the head of the Fontaine dukedom two generations ago, he still held a fair amount of influential power as the king’s advisor.

“I am thinking of enrolling the aforementioned orphan into the Royal Academy. I’d like to leave the procedures to you.” The throne room stirred at Philip III’s words.

The Royal Academy of Beltrum — as both a research institution and education institution — was the pinnacle of academia within the kingdom of Beltrum. While there were several schools and tutors for the wealthy in provincial cities, the Royal Academy of Beltrum was the only government-owned academic organization. Located just next to the royal castle, its grounds covered an immense area that included both elementary and middle school educations. From middle school and upwards, it focused more on specialized areas of research rather than academic education. Each year, the Academy turned out impressive numbers of experts in areas such as martial arts, magical arts, and the sciences. For nobility, graduating from the Royal Academy of Beltrum was a sign of great status, leading to success in both name and practice. Although there was an entrance examination, social standing and wealth played a big role in admission, making most of the students children of high-ranking nobles. Its doors never opened to commoners.

In other words, enrollment was limited to only a small

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

fraction of nobles.

The thought of an orphan of an unknown background attending such an an influential and prestigious academy would naturally shock the nobles in the room, but Garcia simply stroked his beard in understanding.

“I see. You wish for the Academy to keep an eye on the boy?”

“Indeed. Admit him within the next few days. I’m leaving it all to you.”

“As you wish. Claire’s daughter just started teaching the first years in elementary school — I’ll admit him into her class.” Garcia placed a hand against his chest and bowed deeply.

◇◇◇

The time for Rio’s audience with King Philip III had arrived.

The throne room doubled as an audience hall; it held all official audiences of the king. It was a rectangular room with a tall ceiling, filling the room with a sense of grandeur. Ornate decorations were placed at every corner, overwhelming those that entered the room with its powerful display. The royal family — King Philip III; his wife, Queen Consort Beatrix; First Princess Christina; and Second Princess Flora — sat in formal dress, overlooking the room from their podium at the very rear, directly across from the entrance. Christina, the eldest sister, had her young face drawn tightly in resolution, whereas little sister Flora seemed a bit nervous and uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, the nobles of the inner court lined both sides of the aisle, all dressed in formal-wear as well. They were all in attendance to witness the audience about to unfold.

“The boy who saved Her Highness Princess Flora will now enter,” the voice of an official echoed through the silent

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

room. The doors to the audience hall slowly opened, and every person in the room directed their gazes toward it.

A single black-haired boy stood there.

It was Rio.

He had cut his hair in a style that fully exposed his shapely and androgynous facial features, leaving behind a hint of innocence. The royalty and nobility in the room stared at him openly, drawn to the exotic aura brought about by his rarely-seen black hair and eye-catching visage.

“So that’s the child who saved Her Highness.”

“What an unusual hair color. Must be an immigrant child.”

Rio braced himself against the noisily stirring audience hall. He calmly walked down the red carpet, which stretched down the hall to the throne. The stylish children’s formal-wear he wore didn’t quite suit him; under normal circumstances, it would have given off a distinctly statuesque and respectable impression. But unlike his outward appearance, Rio’s expression was exceedingly mature. If this had been a noble child of the same age, it would have been natural for them to be trembling or frozen with frayed nerves. Yet, Rio’s movements were completely calm.

Some of the eyes on him seemed impressed by his bold attitude.

“Hmph, some indigent…”

“Well, he cleaned up surprisingly well… He even moves according to the proper etiquette.”

“What a bizarre sight.”

And so on. Many of their gazes were filled with intolerance as the nobles’ whispers spread like wildfire, but Rio showed no concern at all. He walked forward, step by step, with a composed expression. Eventually, he reached the stairs leading up to the podium, and stopped there, lowering his head. All that was left was to wait until he was

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

spoken to, just as he was taught.

“Raise your head, Rio,” King Philip III stated grandly.

“As you wish, Your Majesty. I am very much obliged,” Rio replied respectfully. He slowly lifted his face and saw the royal family sitting on the podium. On the highest step was Philip III settled onto the throne. Seated one step lower was his wife Beatrix, First Princess Christina, and Second Princess Flora; the latter looked at Rio with restless embarrassment. On Flora’s other side, Christina sat straight in her seat while she eyed Rio suspiciously. She was most likely surprised by how much Rio’s appearance changed when his scruffy hair was cleanly chopped off.

It was evident at a glance that Christina and Flora were siblings — both young girls were beautiful and had lavender hair. Yet the aura they exerted were extreme opposites of each other. Flora’s large, round eyes sparkled a lovely purple, and her pale skin was tinted with a faint blush. Conversely, Christina had her brows furrowed in displeasure, turning away with a huff when she made eye contact with Rio.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“On this occasion, I commend you for saving my daughter. You have done well — I thank you.” Philip III extended his thanks to Rio with his grandiose way of speaking.

“I am wholly unworthy but humbly delighted to receive your praise, Your Majesty,” Rio replied respectfully.

“You carry yourself quite capably in this setting. Did you study the etiquette of royal audiences?”

“Your Majesty, I am beyond words. This is but hastily acquired knowledge that my attendants assisted me in preparing, in the hopes that I would not act disrespectfully in your lofty presence.” Rio’s way of speaking made the king peer at him with a look of admiration.

“I did send a message not to worry about the finer details of ceremonious etiquette, but your efforts are quite admirable. I heard you were living in the slums, but were you born in this country?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I was born and raised in the capital.”

“I see. And your parents…?”

“I have been told that my father and mother were adventurers that traveled from country to country. They emigrated from the far east and had me once they had settled in this kingdom, but both of them are gone now.”

“I see. Immigrants from the far east… So that is why you are living in the slums. That’s quite the tragic past you have for your age, however… I do apologize for asking such difficult questions. Do forgive me.”

“It is no trouble in the least, Your Majesty. It’s all in the past now,” Rio said with a troubled expression.

“I see. Incidentally, I was thinking of rewarding you for your actions…” Philip III started to speak, then paused to look at Rio.

“What are your thoughts about enrolling into the primary school division of the Royal Academy of Beltrum? If you wish, it will lead to favorable employment opportunities in

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

the future. If you produce satisfactory results, we will also support your advancement into the Academy's secondary school."

The king explained the details of the reward, and Rio's eyes widened at the offer suddenly placed before him.

"That... is far beyond what I had wished for," Rio said, a look of indecisiveness faintly appearing on his face.

It was true that as an orphan, Rio completely lacked the education and social etiquette of this world, making the opportunity to enroll in a specialized educational institution not a bad offer at all. But based on this place's cultural standards, it was easy to picture the students attending the Royal Academy of Beltrum as all royalty and nobility. What would happen if Rio went to such a place with his complete lack of any kind of social stature?

Just the thought of it made his spirit heavy.

Even so, Rio had no other choice right now. It was hard to imagine them letting him go freely if he refused, and he had no plans on how he was to live from tomorrow onwards either. After quickly calculating everything in his head, Rio said:

"If Your Majesty would allow it, then I shall gratefully take you for your word and accept this kind offer," he said quietly, deciding to receive the reward. Philip III nodded approvingly.

"Then it has been decided. We will fund all of your expenses from enrollment until graduation. I shall also bestow upon you a separate reward of 100 gold coins."

The room stirred again — that was an extraordinary amount.

The currency in circulation in the markets consisted of six types: small bronze coins, large bronze coins, small silver coins, large silver coins, gold coins, and enchanted gold coins. The exchange rate of each coin to the next in value was ten to one. For example, ten small bronze coins were

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

equivalent to one large bronze coin, and ten large bronze coins could be exchanged for one small silver coin. However, enchanted gold coins were the exception: the number in circulation was extremely small, thus making the standard gold coin the highest value of coin in use.

The enrollment fee into the elementary school division of the Royal Academy of Beltrum was 10 gold coins, and the yearly tuition fee was 30 gold coins. In other words, the first year of schooling cost 40 gold coins in total, and every year after would cost 30 gold coins.

To put it into context, the average yearly income of a noble without land was roughly 40 gold coins.

First and foremost, the royalty and nobility classes were too fixated on their prejudiced views to welcome a lowly orphan into their ranks at the Royal Academy — to watch him receive such a large value reward on top of that would definitely generate animosity.

Rio noticed how the atmosphere in the room had changed, but ignored it.

"...Please accept my *deepest* gratitude for your overwhelming hospitality, Your Majesty," he said instead, bowing his head low.

◇◇◇

The director's office of the Royal Academy of Beltrum was located on the top floor, which was the steeple of the school building. Director Garcia Fontaine had summoned the elementary school teacher in charge of the first-years, Celia Claire, to his office. Once Celia entered, Garcia lowered himself into a regal-looking desk chair at the back of the room. Behind him was a balcony that overlooked the capital of Beltrant.

"Excuse me, Director Fontaine. Did you call for me?"

"Indeed," Garcia said, nodding at Celia's greeting. "Thank

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

you for coming.” Despite his old age showing through the wrinkles on his face, Garcia still had a youthful vigor about him.

“I have called you here today to discuss the enrollment of the orphan from the royal assembly the other day.”

“You mean Rio?”

“That’s right. It has been decided that he will join your class.”

“I see. That shouldn’t be a problem,” Celia replied. A normal professor would have felt a sense of aversion to having a controversial orphan lumped into their class, but Celia readily agreed without any objections.

“You’re still a young and upcoming professor, so I have great expectations of you. Do well.”

“Yes, I will do my best to meet those expectations,” Celia replied, straightening her stance proudly.

“Good. Now, for the real issue at hand… What did you think of the orphan when you met him? I’d like to hear your honest opinion.”

“Let me see… I found him to be an intelligent child that was rather mature for his age,” Celia answered after thinking carefully.

“Oh? What exactly made you think that?” Garcia asked with great interest.

“First, the fact that he seemed to clearly understand the situation he was in. On top of that, he had an ambitious attitude that always sought to make up for his shortcomings. His critical thinking, adaptability, and learning speed were all exceptional, too,” Celia responded with her well-organized impression of Rio.

“Hmm. He was dragged into the Princess’ kidnapping case, taken to the castle, endured an interrogation that was more torture than anything, then was ordered to enroll in the Royal Academy under the auspices of a reward. Did he seem to have any complaints regarding any of those points?

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Ignium," Garcia asked, then chanted a spell. A small magic circle appeared at his fingertip, followed by a flame. He brought the flame towards the pipe he held in his mouth and inhaled, releasing puffs of smoke into the air.

"He seemed reluctant in some ways, but he never voiced any complaints out loud."

"I see..." Garcia said, exhaling a puff of smoke and watching it waft through the air in contemplation.

"Umm, is something the matter with Rio?" Celia asked, uncertain of where the conversation was going.

"Oh, it's nothing. It just isn't a very childlike reaction, that's all," Garcia answered vaguely.

"A childlike reaction?" Celia tilted her head in confusion.

"Indeed. For example, let's say you were suddenly thrown into a cell where a bunch of unknown men violently abused you. What would you think once you were released without a word?"

"...That sounds horrible. It'd definitely cause some kind of trauma... I might even lose trust in other people," Celia replied with a pained expression. Imagining herself in that position made the situation feel all the more wretched.

"That's exactly what I mean. It may seem even more repulsive from your perspective as a girl, but isn't that the normal reaction as a child — no, a human? You would hate the people who treated you unjustly, perhaps mutter a curse or two about them. There may be some who take into account their position and hold back their emotions, but those people are few and far between, even among adults," Garcia stated, sounding strangely profound.

Celia narrowed her eyes immediately. "...What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying he hasn't shown very childlike reactions based on what you've told me. The royal audience etiquette he showed in the hall was unbelievably smooth for something acquired so hastily."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“That’s because I taught him the necessary etiquette. He didn’t know anything at first,” Celia said. She herself hadn’t realized that she was feeling a little offended for Rio and had answered in his defense.

“Hmm. I heard that boy was the one who requested you teach him the etiquette. A normal child would not consider things that far ahead.”

“That’s why I thought he was an intelligent child,” Celia replied stiffly to Garcia’s roundabout way of speaking.

“True, he could just be an intelligent child. There are people like Princess Christina or exemplary child prodigies like your twelve-year-old self that exist. It wouldn’t be odd for him to have been raised that way in the harsh streets of the slums. Either that, or—” Garcia paused, his face falling devoid of expression.

“Or… what?” Celia asked gravely.

“No, it’s nothing. He’s going to have a lot of struggles from here on out. As his teacher, I would like you to pay special attention to him. If anything concerning happens, report it to me. This is something I can only entrust to you,” Garcia said with a calm smile.

“I am certainly more than willing to do that, but…” It felt like there was something more to the issue, so Celia’s expression wasn’t fully convinced.

“Of course, I am aware of how busy you are with your research as well. You must have fallen behind with all the travel in and out of the castle these last few days. You only need to do as much as what will not affect your research.”

“…Very well, I understand. Is that all for today?” Celia was a little curious about what he was thinking, but it didn’t seem like he would answer her if she asked. She just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Yes, you may leave now.”

“Thank you. Please excuse me.” Celia bowed once, then turned on her heel and left.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

I'm not very good at dealing with him… she thought with a small sigh.

◇◇◇

Rio threaded his arms through the sleeves of the Royal Academy of Beltrum's school uniform as he walked down the hallways that his teacher, Celia, was leading him through. He followed after her, noting that her frame appeared quite small and lacked strength.

"How does your new uniform feel?" Celia asked, looking back at Rio as they walked.

"It's not bad. The fabric is sturdy and easy to move around in," Rio replied, lightly moving both his arms in his uniform as though to test the feel.

"It's been custom-made based on the requests of many generations of students, after all. It can also act as a military uniform."

"I see… So that's why the design is like a knight's uniform."

"Right! Isn't it cool? The girls' uniform is cute too," Celia said with a playful smile.

"Ahaha…" Rio laughed awkwardly. Setting aside whether or not he looked forward to seeing the girls' uniform, the Royal Academy's uniform really was stylish. As Rio had said, the design was like that of a knight's uniform. The boys wore pants, while the girls had skirts; while there were some minor differences in design here and there, the overall functionality of each uniform was the same.

"We've arrived."

Chatting while they walked, they reached Celia's classroom. The noisy class could be heard on the other side of the door; inside, the spoiled children of royalty and nobility were enthusiastically talking to each other before homeroom started.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

This is it.

Rio had been keeping track of the route he took through the school as they walked and had memorized the path to this classroom. From tomorrow onwards, he'd be able to make it here by himself.

"You don't seem that nervous," Celia noted.

"That's not true." Rio gave a small shrug.

"Really? You look fairly composed to me."

"I've been told that my emotions don't show easily on my face because I lived in the slums," Rio answered with a bitter smile.

"Is that so… Well, alright. Let's go inside," Celia said and opened the door. A hushed silence fell over the hustle and bustle of the classroom.

"Good morning, everyone," Celia said. "A new student will be joining our class today. Rio, come inside." She walked into the classroom and stepped up onto the teacher's podium.

"Excuse me." With a quick bow, Rio followed Celia into the classroom.

The inside of the classroom was spacious, almost like a small hall. The teacher's podium sat at the front of the room, facing the desks that were fixed to the tiered floor that elevated those at the back of the room. There were roughly forty people in the class, with three classes in each year. Rio stepped up onto the podium and felt the stabbing looks of all the students in the room. Soft whispers spread from every corner.

"Huh, so that's the orphan being admitted."

"An orphan? Someone like that enrolled into this prestigious academy?"

"Yeah, I heard from my father that he was enrolled as reward for a *commendable deed*."

"…Are you sure it isn't some kind of mistake?"

And so on. The male students conversed curiously; it

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

seemed like the rumor of an orphan enrolling had already spread. As for the female students' reactions…

"Black hair is a rare sight."

"Yes, I was wondering what kind of animal would show up, but…"

"He has a surprisingly cute face."

"He'd look like a girl if he put on a wig and a dress."

"Hmm… Well, his face isn't bad, but he's still an orphan." His classmates added more comments about his appearance in their evaluation. Both sides were fairly ornery in their reactions, having already been instilled with the values of nobility that thrived on social standing.

The looks they sent Rio were filled with prejudice.

"Okay everyone, quiet down. He's going to introduce himself," Celia said with a small sigh as she looked around the room. Once the students had stopped whispering, Rio took a step forward.

"My name is Rio. By the grace of His Majesty the King, I have been immeasurably blessed to attend this honorable learning space. I am lacking in more than several aspects, but I will do my utter best not to cause any inconveniences to anyone here. I humbly beg your tolerance."

He finished his introduction and greeting with a deep bow. It was a satisfactory introduction that bordered on being *too* polite for a seven-year-old, but this level of humility was probably just right when it came to introductions in front of royalty and nobility; Celia had helped him create this greeting as well.

Sure enough, Rio and Celia's predictions as to how the class would react were not wrong.

"Well, it seems he has the right level of respect, at least."

"Yeah, he can speak as adequately as a servant, at least."

"So orphans can talk like that…"

At the very least, his speech hadn't brought about any dissatisfaction. That being said, no one applauded him,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

either — they spoke as though they were observing a rare animal, clearly looking down on Rio. Though he might be a student of the Royal Academy from today onwards, Rio had been an orphan until recently, and his existence was far beneath them.

So I have to spend at least six years here… He sighed wearily in his heart at how uncomfortably out of place he was. While he would no longer be troubled to find food, clothes, or shelter, the thought of his future life was rather depressing.

But it's still better than the slums. I'll learn everything and anything that seems useful. Otherwise, there would be no point in coming to this school, and Rio already knew how important it was to obtain a proper education after all. Without knowledge and skills, his future job opportunities would be extremely limited, though he didn't know what would be useful in his life anyway.

As long as he was being made to attend this school, he had to make the most of his situation.

Rio raised his head after bowing and looked around the room. Then…

…*Hm?* He spotted a familiar face among the students staring at him. Seated next to a window at the back of the classroom was someone with long, lavender hair that was tied back with a barrette. Beside her sat a cute girl with blonde ringlets. The lavender-haired girl — Christina Beltrum — glared at Rio before turning her nose away with a huff. The thought had passed through his mind in the audience hall too: she seemed to really hate him, although that was understandable considering how they met.

Well, it's probably best not to get involved… She probably thinks the same.

Christina definitely didn't have any favorable feelings towards Rio, and Rio had absolutely no intention of having any connection to Christina.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Alright. From today onwards, Rio is one of our classmates. He may be unfamiliar with many things, so please help him out when he needs it. I hope you all get along well,” Celia said in a bright voice, breaking the heavy atmosphere in the room, but there was no response from the students. Celia gave a small sigh.

“…Okay Rio, why don’t you sit in one of the empty seats? That’ll be your assigned seat from now on. I would recommend the one at the very front.”

It would be easier for Celia to keep an eye on him there.

“Understood.” Rio moved to the open desk at the front of the classroom and lowered himself into the seat.

“That’s all the announcements for today, so let’s dive straight into the lesson.”

◇◇◇

At the Royal Academy of Beltrum, the teachers changed with every subject, and the homeroom teacher wasn’t necessarily the teacher for all of the subjects. Fortunately, Rio’s first lesson at the Royal Academy was an arithmetic class taught by Celia.

“Everyone here passed the entrance examination, so you all know your four basic operations already. Today, we’ll be trying to solve some more advanced problems,” Celia said as she stood at the teacher’s podium and wrote the exercises down on the blackboard. The questions were simple enough to be solved by a elementary school student in Japan.

“Now, please solve the questions on the blackboard,” Celia said once she finished writing. The students all moved their quills at once to work on the exercises. Once she had confirmed that they were working, Celia approached Rio.

“Ah… Rio. I’m not sure what level you’re at, so I’d just like to check — can you solve the questions on the board?”

“I’m sorry… I can’t even read the words,” Rio answered

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Celia's whispered question.

"I see. So we'll have to start with numbers and letters," Celia said with an uneasy look. "Then I'll give you some individual lessons in my research lab… Could you come to the basement of the library tower after class? You can just sit through the lesson for today," she added after a few seconds of consideration, keeping in mind the balance of progress with the rest of the class.

"Yes ma'am." Rio followed her decision obediently. It wasn't his intention to delay the progress of the rest of the class just for himself.

The arithmetic class continued without incident until the end of the lesson.

◇◇◇

After the first class was over, it was break time. Celia left the classroom to head to her next class, leaving the students behind. A strange atmosphere then descended upon the classroom, and countless gazes fell upon the empty space that surrounded Rio, who sat by himself at the front of the room. …*Whisper whisper whisper*…

"Seems like he can't do arithmetic. He was just listening the whole time."

"Ah, it must be because he didn't take the entrance examination to get in."

"He's an orphan after all. An orphan. There's no way he's had a proper education… I bet he can't even read the characters."

"Wow, why did they let someone like that into the school?"

Perhaps they were intrigued — or amused — by the sight of an orphan they normally wouldn't come into contact with, as the students were speaking quietly to each other as they stared at Rio from afar. He could hear them giggling to

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

themselves. *Well… they'll get bored eventually*. While he felt as comfortable as sleeping on a bed of nails, that was, at least, as far as his classmates went. He could ignore that much. He'd be quite the spectacle to them for the near future, but they'd eventually stop paying attention to him. Rio heaved a small sigh at that thought.

"Hey, you. Do you have a moment?"

Just then, a girl walked down from the back of the classroom and addressed Rio with an air of composure. It was a voice he had heard before — and very recently, at that. Rio turned his gaze towards the owner of said voice.

The cute girl with blonde ringlets who had been sitting next to Christina earlier was standing there, watching him. Her wide eyes had a forceful strength behind them as she looked at Rio in annoyance.

Is she the girl who was with Princess Christina in the slums? Rio assumed from her familiar voice. She had been wearing a robe at the time, so he didn't know her face, but he recalled her name as Roanna.

"Can I help you with anything?"

"*Can I help you with anything*? No, there's nothing you can help me with. What was the meaning of that lesson just now?" The girl he assumed to be Roanna spoke clearly, then gave an exaggerated sigh.

"…I'm sorry. What do you mean?" Unable to understand the conversation, Rio tilted his head.

"You seem to grasp the basic concepts of language, but you can't even read numbers?"

"Yes," Rio confirmed calmly. The girl raised her eyebrows.

"Are you fooling around right now? The Royal Academy of Beltrum is a place of learning with a long history of tradition and status. We all had to pass a difficult entrance examination to be here, and yet you can't even read characters — that makes you no different than a monkey," the girl stated indignantly.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Suddenly, a voice interrupted to agree with her.

"Why, it's exactly as Lady Roanna says!"

The new voice who interjected belonged to a boy with a pretty face. Rio and the girl both turned to look at him.

"What is it, Alphonse? I'm talking to *him* right now." Roanna narrowed her eyes at him, unhappy at being interrupted.

"Well, pardon me. I was just thinking about how a dirty commoner in my line of sight is unpleasant enough, so having one enrolled in the Royal Academy of Beltrum is *truly* some sort of nightmare," Alphonse said coldly.

"This boy's enrollment was decided by His Majesty, the King. I don't believe you're in a position to criticize," Roanna said.

"Yes, it is as you say," Alphonse agreed with a smug smirk. "However, I do not wish for this boy to get the wrong idea, either. That's why I'm going to make things clear right now." He looked around at the other students in the classroom.

"What do you mean?" Roanna asked doubtfully.

"I'm telling you not to assume he's of equal status to us, that's all. Everyone here is a chosen child of royalty and nobility. It would be unpleasant to have a commoner act like he's one of us." Alphonse didn't bother to hide any of his contempt at Rio and shot a glare at him.

It was pointless to say anything to someone with such a strong sense of prejudice.

He'd just have to spout some random words of submission to appease him… that's what Rio was thinking as he received Alphonse's unchanging glare.

"With all due respect—"

"I haven't given you permission to speak, commoner. Do not interrupt the conversation of nobles. It's unpleasant."

Rio had opened his mouth and Alphonse immediately spoke over him with a triumphant smile, as though he had been waiting for it. Silence fell over the classroom, before

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

giggles started to break out from all over. Seeing the reactions of the other students made Alphonse grin even wider in satisfaction. Rio fell silent, a cold smile remaining on his face.

"That's enough, Alphonse. If you're just here to ridicule others, then please take your leave," Roanna told him in a weary voice.

"I shall do just that. Excuse me."

With a nod, Alphonse returned to the back of the room with a smug expression. Roanna looked at Rio and opened her mouth once again.

"...As I was saying. To put it frankly, you're not worthy of being in this school."

"Please accept my sincerest apologies — I have not had an education."

"So it seems, yes. But the more your comprehension falls behind, the more you'll be holding us back, too. You'll be smearing mud all over this school's name." Roanna took Rio's unreserved statement at face value.

"It is exactly as you say."

"Then you need to show some effort, and leave behind good results; there are examinations at the end of every school semester here at the academy. That's all I have to say."

"I understand. I vow to exert my best efforts in order to avoid becoming a hindrance on everyone. Miss Roanna, thank you very much for your concern," Rio thanked her as he lowered his head politely.

"It's fine. This is part of my job as acting class representative on Princess Christina's behalf. Even if that wasn't the case, it is the role of nobility to lead the commoners."

Those were probably her true feelings; Roanna was trying to lead Rio as the class representative and as a noble. There was a sense of duty and responsibility there... Perhaps that

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

was why Rio couldn't sense the same animosity behind Roanna's words as he did Alphonse's.

◇◇◇

After his first day of class was over, Rio made his way to the library tower where the instructor research labs were located. The library took up three floors of the tower, with the remaining floors allocated to the instructors that taught at the Academy. Celia's laboratory was in one such space underneath the tower.

The ground floor entrance of the library opened to an exorbitant number of books, crammed snuggly into shelves sorted by subject. Although Rio was curious about what kinds of books were available, he had other matters to deal with today, and headed straight for the underground research labs once he'd completed the necessary forms at the reception desk. Once downstairs, the basement was comprised of a long passage illuminated by magic lamps.

"Must be here."

Rio had arrived at Celia's lab safely, having asked for directions at the reception. He couldn't read the letters on the nameplate attached to the door, but figured that this should be the right place.

Knock, knock. Rio rapped slowly on the door.

"....." No response came from the other side of the door.

"Is she not here?"

Rio tilted his head in confusion and knocked again, this time with more force. *Knock, knock*. Still no response.

"Professor Celia, are you there?" *Knock, knock*.

He continued to knock as he called. If she wasn't here, he should just give up and come back tomorrow—

Just as Rio thought that, the door flew open, making him jump in surprise. Luckily, the door had opened inwards — if it were an outward-facing door, it might have smacked him

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

in the face.

“Oh my god, shut up already! Can’t you read the sign? I’m in the middle of something right now, go awa…” Celia protested loudly as she burst out of the room, but trailed off at the sight of Rio’s face. Rio stared back at her dumbfoundedly; his impression of her as a sheltered and proper noble daughter had flown out the window.

“Erm… I’m here for the individual lessons you mentioned…” Rio stated his business hesitantly with a stiff smile.

“Huh? Ah, yes… R-Right… Welcome! Yes, I’ve been expecting you.” With a pondering pause and gasp later, Celia recovered herself smoothly with a sweet smile.

She definitely forgot, Rio thought with a strained expression, but decided to play along anyway.

“My apologies for the inconvenience.”

“It’s fine!” Celia said, smiling a bit abashedly. “As your instructor, I can’t just leave you behind.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Yes, well. There’s no point in standing around, so come on in — ah.” Celia turned around to invite Rio inside and immediately stiffened.

Oh no. I forgot he was coming so I didn’t clean the room!

“What’s wrong?” Rio asked from behind a silently panicking Celia.

“Eh? Ah… no, nothing. Yes. Um. My room’s a little bit messy right now, but pay it no mind.” Celia gave him her biggest and brightest forced smile to try and cover up her oversight.

“Sure, that’s fine.” Rio nodded, then stepped into the room.

…This is a ***little bit*** *messy…?*

Rio recoiled at the chaos laid out before him. It was much worse than he imagined.

The room was an impressive size of over 350 square feet,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

but the floor was scattered with documents, books, and other miscellaneous items of unknown purpose to Rio. There was a desk that was also covered in books and papers, with the leftovers of a light meal — a plate and teacup — stacked at the end. It was hard to believe that this was the room of a cute young lady.

"I-It's normally cleaner than this! I was just a bit busy and my research was at a good stride so I put it off for later..."

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Celia must have noticed the change in Rio's expression, because she blushed while explaining herself. Unable to come up with a good response, Rio pointed to the books that caught his eye and complimented Celia.

"T-Those are a lot of difficult-looking books, Professor. You're really amazing for such a young age!"

It was a very low-effort response, but Celia latched onto it.

"Eh? Ah… aah, yes. I'm only twelve years old, you know? I should still be in the primary division at this age, yet I've already graduated from the secondary school!" Celia proudly puffed out her small chest. Her cheeks were still a little red, but she seemed grateful for the change of topic.

"That really is amazing."

"R-Right! I actually wanted to dedicate myself to my magic research more, but the researchers here all have to take a part in instructing," Celia babbled. The way she was trying to act mature was strangely cute, making Rio smile faintly.

"Umm… I'll clear a space, so just wait there."

She began cleaning up the items left on the desk and chairs in the middle of the room. There seemed to be a certain methodology to how the items were haphazardly scattered, which allowed Celia to briskly organize them. Figuring he shouldn't move any of the books and documents himself, Rio decided to stand back and watch, but…

"…"

He noticed that Celia was bent forward as she cleaned, making her skirt flutter dangerously. Her slender legs had an elegant charm that didn't suit her age… Rio quickly averted his eyes and sighed at Celia's obliviousness.

Several minutes later, Rio and Celia sat opposite each other at her desk, with several writing tools placed before them.

"Okay, let's start."

"All right."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“So where shall we begin… Okay, how about this — do you know what numbers are and what they mean?”

“I do,” Rio answered immediately.

“Hmm… okay. Take these five books, then. Let’s say you finished reading three of them. How many more books do you still have to read?” Celia gave Rio a simple question to check if he really understood.

“Two books.” Once again, Rio answered immediately.

Celia’s eyes widened in surprise. “My, so you really do understand. If you can do subtraction, that means you must be able to do addition, too. Okay, how about this?”

Celia picked up a quill pen from the table and wrote down a simple addition question on some paper.

“Um… I can’t read characters, so…” Rio said in a troubled voice.

“Oh, that’s right. So you can do the calculations, but you can’t read the numbers?”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, that’s a little odd… But I suppose it’s not unheard of? Paper *is* expensive, after all…” Celia muttered to herself in thought.

“All right, I guess that means I just need to teach you the numbers. That should make things pretty simple — and much easier for me. I’m going to write down the numbers from zero to nine here. Can you remember them?” Celia asked as she smoothly jotted the numbers down.

“Sure.”

“From the left, it goes zero, one, two, increasing as such. Tell me once you’re done remembering them and I’ll give you some arithmetic problems.”

“Okay.” Rio nodded. He used his finger to trace the numbers as he memorized them. They were very simple in shape, so he was able to finish memorizing them in a short amount of time.

“I’ve remembered them.”

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Eh? Already? Okay, then write the numbers from zero to nine here.” Celia turned the paper over and handed it to Rio. Rio wrote down the characters with ease.

“Correct. Your handwriting is really neat, too,” Celia commented in awe. “Okay. Next, let’s jump straight into addition and subtraction problems. I’ll teach you the symbols as well.”

“Okay. Could you give me questions that are on the same level as the class right now? I want to see how well I can keep up.”

“At the same level as the class… That’d be the four basic operations, which includes multiplication and division. Wouldn’t that be too hard?”

“It’s fine, I think. Multiplication is where you figure out how many apples you need to give six children five apples each, right? And division is just the opposite.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right. Where did you learn that?” Celia wondered out loud.

“…From my dead mother.”

That was a lie. He had learned the basic operations long ago through his education in his other life. All Celia needed to teach Rio was how to read the numbers and symbols — but he couldn’t tell her that. Rio decided to simplify things by saying he had learned it from his dead mother, since there was no way for the truth to be unearthed and proven.

“I see. Your mother must have been very educated.” Feeling bad for asking such a thing, Celia’s expression clouded over.

“Yes. She was a very warm and kind person…” Rio’s expression faintly darkened, too.

“Umm, okay… so if that’s the case, then that means you can do the basic operations. I’ll create some problems for you at the same level as the rest of the class. You can give that a try.”

At Rio’s inclination of his head, Celia pulled over a new

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

piece of paper. She began to write question after question on it, until there were roughly twenty questions utilizing the four different operations.

“The symbols at the top are the four basic mathematic operators. Starting from the left, it’s addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Now begin.”

At Celia’s signal, Rio glanced over all the questions. From Amakawa Haruto’s perspective, the sheet was full of questions that were far too easy for him.

“I’m done.”

Rio solved all the questions in less than half a minute. His concentration on the paper had distracted him from noticing Celia’s look of astonishment.

“They’re all correct…” She’d probably been checking his work as he went, as she was able to give him her assessment immediately.

“Then that means I won’t have any problems with arithmetic. I need to learn the letters next, but there are more of those than numbers, right?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. Right…”

“Is something the matter?” Rio asked, puzzled at Celia’s short answer.

“Nothing’s the matter… You’re just really fast at mental calculations.”

“Is that… so? Isn’t everyone else in the class at this level?”

“No. Only Her Highness, Princess Christina, is at this level. Roanna’s also rather fast, but not as fast as you,” Celia said with a stiff smile.

That was when Rio realized the mistake he had made.

He had assumed that the most prestigious academy in the kingdom would have students of fairly advanced academic abilities. After all, the students themselves had bragged about their prowess and how they had already learned the basic operations for the entry examination. That was why Rio had mistakenly thought that this much was easy for their

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

level.

“Well, I used to do calculations in my head often. My mother said it would come in handy someday.” Rio faltered for a second before making up an excuse on the spot.

“Is that… so…” Celia looked at Rio doubtfully, but Rio ignored her stare.

“Do you know if there are any books for children learning to read, Professor?” he asked instead.

Celia pondered for a moment before answering. “…There are. I’ll give you a list; you can borrow them at the library on your way back,” she answered with a small sigh.

“Thank you very much.”

“It’s fine, this is part of my duty as your instructor. So… how was your first day at the academy? Let me know if there’s anything you’re unhappy with,” Celia asked with a teacherly look of concern. The events that happened during today’s break flashed in Rio’s mind, but he didn’t feel the need to report it to Celia. It was only his first day here, and the others involved were only children, in the end.

“No, it was fine.”

“Really?”

Rio nodded his head plainly, which seemed to surprise Celia. She looked as though she had more that she wanted to ask, stumbling over her next words.

“Umm. I was just, you know, wondering if you made any friends…” she eventually asked, hesitantly.

“Friends? No, I didn’t want to overstep myself by acting overly familiar with the nobles,” Rio stated calmly. Celia seemed a little upset at that.

“Well, yes, I suppose… you’re right. That would make things difficult,” she sighed. Rio tilted his head in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, I just wished I could do more to help you make friends. You know how relationships between nobility can get complicated… There are some children who fuss over

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

their superiority, so I have to watch what I say or they'll be unhappy," Celia grumbled.

"Aren't you a noble too, Professor?"

"Well, I suppose that's true," Celia sighed with a bitter smile.

"I don't really have a problem with it. I want to focus on my studies more anyway."

"Ahaha..." Celia laughed awkwardly at Rio's blunt reply. "That's what makes you so mature — or boring, I should say."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. Noble children may seem precocious, but they're all just attention-craving children at heart. But you... you're different. You seem to make your every move based on whether you deem it necessary or not."

"...That makes sense."

"Well, that doesn't mean it's a bad thing. It's just that you're more independent than I was expecting, so I'm at a loss for what to do. ...Sorry for saying something so weird."

"No, thank you for thinking about me." Rio bowed his head deeply. The other instructors were unlikely to have treated him as kindly as this.

"Like I said, it's my duty as your teacher. If anything happens, don't hesitate to come see me. I don't know if I'll be any help, but I can at least hear you out."

"Okay."

Rio returned Celia's warm smile with a soft one of his own.

◇◇◇

After borrowing the books from the library, Rio returned to the dormitory tower on the academy grounds. His room assignment was on the top floor; it had a great view, but the climb up the stairs made it an unpopular leftover selection.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

And it was in this room that Rio would spend at least the next six years.

While many of the high-ranked royalty and nobility commuted from their own residences in the capital, the dormitory tower was still a facility that accommodated nobles. The rooms were spacious — easily over 350 square feet — and all essential furniture was provided. A personal maid could either be brought from home, or one could be hired from the academy for a determined price. It truly left nothing to be desired.

Rio moved a chair next to the window and gazed at the outside scenery; it was still evening, and the sky was tinted a rosy red. The dormitory tower of the academy sat on elevated land that overlooked the capital of Beltrant, allowing him a view of the city and surrounding farms. That being said, most of the scenery in his field of view was wilderness and nature. A dense, overgrown forest spread widely before huge towering mountains, leaving the area of human civilization very small.

It would be *impossible* to see this kind of scenery in Japan.

The events in the days that followed the return of his memories had been so bewildering, he hadn't had the time to consider what had happened to him properly. Now that he finally had time to himself, he became strangely emotional as all sorts of feelings surged within him.

"This really is another world..." Rio murmured with a sigh.

He had never heard of the kingdom of Beltrum before. The stage of civilization was far too different from Earth, and — most importantly — magic existed as though it was completely normal. It was like the world of some fantasy-themed game.

He wanted to believe it was a dream, but it wasn't. This was neither Japan nor Earth.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“I died. That’s right… I died. I’m dead… Ha… haha…” A dry laugh burst forth from Rio.

The melding of Haruto and Rio’s minds had allowed his stream of consciousness to stay constant, making it harder to feel the reality of Amakawa Haruto’s death. But saying the truth out loud had made an indescribable feeling rise within him. Right now, he was not Haruto, but another person named Rio — the only one in this world who knew who Amakawa Haruto was. That thought alone made him want to return Earth very much.

He missed his family… And he wanted to see Miharu once more. He dreamed of the day he could see her and tell her his feelings. Was this emotion what they called being “homesick”?

But there didn’t appear to be a way back to Earth. He didn’t even know *why* he was reincarnated — and there was no way for the dead to come back to life, anyway. The only thing left for Rio in this world were his precious memories of his mother and the rage he held for the man that stomped on them. The only thing left was reality.

Wasn’t that so ruthlessly unjust?

Rio grinded his teeth together as he narrowed his eyes at the scenery outside his window. The evening sun was setting far on the horizon, painting the extraordinarily beautiful sky. Seeing that made Rio vow in his heart to keep living.

There was no way he could stop now. Coming to a standstill meant that Rio’s life would lose meaning.

He refused to die in a place like this, knowing nothing and accomplishing nothing… As if he’d give up. He’d live on, strongly and stubbornly.

That’s what he decided. It was a vow that Rio had made once before, but now he was making it once again with the memories and personality of Amakawa Haruto inside him. But it would be a long, tough road, and Rio didn’t understand just how harsh it could get.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

How fragile, fleeting, and empty the road in front of him was.

◇◇◇

Hordes of small, uniform-clad children were gathered on the outdoor proving grounds of the Royal Academy of Beltrum. Rio was among them.

“As nobles, you must have at least a minimum knowledge of martial arts,” said a brawny man that stood in front of the students.

Rio was currently in his martial arts class.

The male students all held a wooden sword and shield in their hands, while the female students had wooden staves.

“Continuing on from our last lesson, today we will be learning about form. Repeat the form I taught you last time for ten reps in one set, for five sets. Do them slowly and check how you move. Once you’re done, form groups of two and check your partner’s movements for five sets.”

At the instructor’s orders, the students began to move — the male students in particular swung their wooden swords enthusiastically.

“Rio. I’ll teach you personally since you don’t know the forms yet. Follow me.”

Rio obediently followed the instructor. They headed for an area away from the rest of the students and stood face-to-face a moderate distance apart from each other.

“Have you ever held a sword before, Rio?”

“Yes. Technically,” Rio admitted. Strictly speaking, the one that he held was a katana. The katana his grandfather owned in his previous life.

“Hm. I see. Then, first, I’ll review how well you can use it. Try and land a blow on me with that sword. Come at me when you’re ready,” the instructor said, holding his sword up.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

What an action-oriented man. Rio's mouth twitched in a wry smile at the simple progression of the conversation. This instructor believed in talking through the body rather than words, however his posture was very practical and refined, even from Rio's perspective. His skill was authentic.

But... what should I do? Rio pondered as he adjusted his grip on the sword. He didn't understand the principles yet, but he could probably land a hit if he strengthened his physical abilities with magic essence. He had confidence in doing that, but the instructor would definitely notice that something strange was going on if a child with no magic training showed movements more advanced than an adult's. And if that happened, he'd have to explain himself.

It's probably best to just do it with my natural strength. Let's get this over with.

Once Rio had decided, he held the sword ready. Though he had never held a shield at the same time as a sword before, he improvised.

"Is that a stance of your own style?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"I see. You seem to have talent." The instructor grinned. In the next instant, Rio took off running straight for him.

Approach, then cut. That's what swordcraft boiled down to. As though embodying that mantra, Rio approached the instructor and swung his sword with a test swing. The instructor easily received the sword.

"Hmm," he murmured as though he was impressed, staring at Rio's grip and blade control on the sword. "Good grasp of the sword. Your wrist won't hurt that way."

Rio concluded that this man had excellent observation skills, fitting for an instructor. It wasn't easy to hide the basic techniques he had already learned. That being said, his posture was a bit unique due to his unfamiliarity with holding a shield.

Rio swung the wooden sword again, and again, and again.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

But the instructor handled them all with an elegant deftness. Of course. There was no way a child could compare with an instructor in a duel — in both strength and speed. He'd have to rely on his technical ability if he were to have a chance at landing a blow, but using all the techniques he learned from his grandfather in his previous life would also be considered abnormal. *Well, I doubt he actually expects me to land a blow*. Rio assessed the situation calmly.

"Good! Well done, Rio. Could do with a little more fire in you, but you're suited for knighthood!" the instructor beamed. He was as hot-blooded as Rio predicted.

To be honest, it was a bit stifling.

"Unfortunately, I have no interest in becoming a knight."

"What?! Well, you'll be at the academy for a long time. I'll make sure to teach you all the swordcraft a knight needs, so don't worry."

Was that meant to be reassuring? Their conversation wasn't coalescing at all… Rio swung his sword with a bitter smile. Then—

"!"

Suddenly, the instructor launched a swift strike against Rio, who reflexively stepped back to evade it.

"Oho! So you can react to that," the instructor murmured in awe.

"You're not meant to be the one attacking, sir."

"There's no rule against it! But now I know your strength. That's enough." The instructor lowered his sword. Rio followed suit.

"As a child, you don't have much speed or power. However, your movements were very refined. You have quite the talent when it comes to handling a sword, but it would've been better if you had incorporated your shield into your attacks."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good. Now, we shall move on to learning forms."

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Please, give me your guidance.” Rio bowed his head.

He spent some time learning Beltrum-style swordcraft from the instructor. As he was rather quick on the uptake, Rio was able to imitate the forms easily after seeing them a few times. The instructor found this amusing, and showed him one form after another, until they lost track of time doing so.

“Ah, I’d better get back soon. The other students have started finishing up.”

They walked back to where the other students were. Just then, Rio felt someone looking at him. He glanced over at the direction of the gaze: it was Christina and Roanna. The other students, who were separated from him, had shown no interest in Rio. The boys were trying to show off in front of the girls with their eager sword swings, while the girls noisily chatted away as they watched them.

“Hmph!” Christina huffed in displeasure and immediately broke their eye contact.

Next to her, Roanna — who had been Christina’s partner for the practice sets — was in a state of shock as she stared at Rio.

Were they watching me? Rio questioned in his head.

But he didn’t really care if they did — it wasn’t as if he was doing anything special.

He lost his interest in the two girls and looked away from them.

◇◇◇

Thus, half a year passed since Rio’s enrollment into the Royal Academy of Beltrum.

While he had been a spectacle at first and was often picked on, the other students gradually lost their interest in him.

They got bored.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

It would've been more interesting for them if their taunts had been met with fury and rebellion, but Rio never said anything in return. He always kept his head down, and only ever replied with polite remarks. There were still students who tried to provoke him anyway, but their insults were repetitive and had completely lost their effect.

The students became indifferent to Rio's existence, making his presence in the classroom near-invisible, while Rio himself had never wished to connect with the other students, either. Thanks to that, he'd spent his days focusing on his studies and training, He'd sit through his classes during the day, then head to the library after school to study. Once he returned to his dorm, he would swing his sword to keep his movements from dulling.

Every day was a repeat of that schedule, with the unchanging days passing by. Thanks to that, Rio was able to gradually improve himself, and as a result, the day came for that improvement to manifest itself.

The Royal Academy of Beltrum used a two-semester system with an exam at the end of each season. The first day of the second semester was the day the results of the end-of-semester exams were announced. Grades were usually notified to the students individually, but the top ten students and their scores were posted on the bulletin board.

A large crowd of students had gathered before the bulletin board of the first-year corridor, and they were all murmuring restlessly in obvious confusion and shock.

"What a joke! That disgusting commoner topped our year?!" Alphonse Rodan — the second son of Marquess Rodan — trembled in fury as he yelled. He was looking at the bulletin board where the end-of-semester results were posted.

There, Rio and Christina had tied for first place, Roanna was third place, while Alphonse's name was in sixth place.

In other words, every first year other than Christina had

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

lost to Rio.

A lowlife orphan with no family name. An inferior student that couldn't even read half a year ago. The one everyone had looked down on as a joke. An insect no one had even considered.

The humiliation was hard to bear, and it was enough reason to question the validity of the results.

"This is some kind of mistake! He must have cheated!" Alphonse yelled loudly.

"That's right!" his friends around him cheered in agreement.

Alphonse was one of the chosen ones — since infancy, he had been studying to pass the entrance examination into the Royal Academy of Beltrum. The thought of him losing to an inferior, lowlife orphan who couldn't even read mere months ago was intolerable — and impossible. That was why Alphonse came to the conclusion that there had to be a mistake with the exam results — that Rio had to have cheated.

Meanwhile, two small girls looked on as Alphonse and the others made a ruckus. It was Christina and Roanna, but their expressions were vastly different from the other students. Christina was glaring at the bulletin board with her usual sulky expression, while Roanna had fallen completely speechless in shock.

I'm... third? I knew I was no match for Princess Christina, but to lose to a child that couldn't even read?

Roanna was certain she'd come second. She'd had absolute confidence in that, considering her own talents and how hard she had worked until now.

But when she'd opened her eyes, she was third.

The Royal Academy of Beltrum was the kingdom's greatest education institute — considering how there were over a hundred students in the first year, third was definitely not a bad result. It was a rank to be proud of.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

And yet…

You're not worthy of being in this school — Roanna suddenly remembered the words she had spoken to Rio half a year ago. Exasperated at the presence of someone who couldn't even read, she had said those words out of a sense of duty and responsibility as both a noble guiding the commoner and a class representative protecting the academy.

The unworthy one was me!

Roanna felt her face flush with embarrassment. The words she had uttered because of her doubtless belief of being better had returned to her like a boomerang.

It was unbearably embarrassing.

"You!" A loud voice suddenly echoed from around her. Roanna flinched and turned to look at the origin of the voice. There, Alphonse and several other students had surrounded Rio.

"Speak! What cheats did you use?" Alphonse grabbed Rio by the collar and drew him closer.

"None. I just took the exam normally," Rio answered calmly.

"Lies! There's no way you'd get a rank like that without cheating!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you're trying to say…" Rio replied in exasperation to the one-sided accusations.

Red in the face, Alphonse glared at Rio.

"You either bribed the grading officer or you cheated!"

"I don't think that's something that I could accomplish…"

"Is that so? Well, you definitely used some sort of dirty trick!"

"I was told not to hold everyone else back, so I applied my best efforts."

"Impossible!"

Rio sighed at Alphonse's absolute refusal to listen. After repeatedly telling Rio not to hold him back, this was how he

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

behaved once Rio scored higher than him.

Maybe I should've taken it easy instead…

With his lack of friends at the academy and overwhelming amount of information he had to learn about the world, Rio hadn't been able to gauge the level he was at compared to the other students. He had intended on taking this test seriously in order to determine that — which resulted in this.

For the record, he had scored full marks in every subject.

He had a hunch his score had ranked in among the top students, so he had decided to drop by and the peek at the results before leaving — but was caught by Alphonse.

What should I do…

He wanted to leave this place as quickly as possible, but it didn't seem like talking would make the other boy back down. Perhaps he should try leaving forcefully. Just as he thought that—

"Hey, why don't you say something?" Alphonse said to him angrily.

"Stop it, Alphonse. Jealousy is an unsightly look for a noble."

Roanna suddenly interrupted him, having approached at some point. Her comment seemed to hit the mark, as Alphonse's face twitched with rage.

"J-Jealousy? I'm afraid I can't let that pass. I simply wanted to reveal the cheater…"

"First place isn't so easy to achieve simply by cheating. Unless you have concrete evidence of *how* he cheated?"

"T-That's…" Alphonse was cornered by Roanna's rational rebuttals.

"If you don't have any, then what you're saying is a baseless accusation. It's an insult to the dignity of the academy, and I'm afraid I can't overlook it as the class representative," Roanna declared strongly.

An additional voice then spoke up in support: "I didn't hear the whole thing, but I understand what you're saying.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

It’s exactly as Roanna says, Alphonse.”

Celia had appeared from somewhere.

“P-Professor Claire…”

“There have been no signs of cheating, nor attempts at bribery detected on the academy’s side. This examination result was completely obtained by Rio’s own efforts. That, I can guarantee,” Celia stated clearly.

“Tch…” Completely lost for words, Alphonse’s face screwed up in frustration. “H-Hmph! I won’t accept this!”

He deposited those words behind, before quickly leaving the scene, with his gang of followers retreating with him.

“All right, everyone. Head to class if you’re done checking the grades. Homeroom is about to start,” Celia said, clapping her hands together. The gathered onlookers started to scatter in every direction.

Free from the attention, Rio turned to Roanna and Celia. “Thank you very much,” he said, bowing his head in gratitude.

“Hmph,” Roanna huffed quietly. “…It’s not like I was intervening for your sake. I won’t lose next time,” she declared, before turning around and leaving too. Rio and Celia watched her retreat.

“She’s not a bad girl, you know. She just has a lot of pride and a rigid sense of duty, so she’s strict with herself and with others,” Celia said with a wry smile.

“So it seems,” Rio agreed with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Are you going to study at the library again today, Rio?”

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

“I see. Then let’s have tea in my research lab. You can drop by whenever you’re ready.”

“Sure.”

That day, after school, Rio visited Celia’s research lab. After preparing the tea with precision and letting it steep for a moderate amount of time, he poured the tea from the teapot into the teacup. A floral scent wafted through the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

room. Once the last drop fell into the cup, Rio offered it to Celia.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you. There’s nothing like the tea that you serve. Even though they’re the same tea leaves, the fragrance is completely different when I pour it,” Celia noted, enjoying the fragrance flowing from the tea.

“I’m just following the instructions I read in a book. Anyone could do it if they tried.”

“That’s not true. There may be different ways to make it taste good, but there’ll be differences based on who prepares it.” Celia smiled happily as she elegantly sipped the tea.

The instructors of the Royal Academy of Beltrum were typically researchers first, having only been assigned teaching duties during their free time. Thanks to that, the class instructors had very little interest in the students, and few bothered to interact with them outside of the classroom. It went without saying, then, that cases where instructors held frequent tea parties with their students were extremely rare.

Yet, by some curious circumstance, Rio and Celia had become close enough to have tea together quite often.

It all started when Celia extended an invitation to Rio while he was working hard during one of his daily study trips to the library. At first glance, Celia appeared to be a graceful and quiet noble daughter — but contrary to her looks, she was wildly candid in personality. Her only minor drawback was her inability to hear her surroundings when she was in research fever mode.

Celia was unlike the other royalty and nobility that Rio had met up until now — she never treated Rio any differently because he was an orphan. Perhaps that was why the two had hit it off once they started having tea parties; nowadays they were close to the point that conversation naturally flowed between them.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

The only person Rio could relax around in the midst of his oppressive academic life was Celia.

“And congratulations on ranking first in the semester exam, by the way. That was amazing. I know you were studying every day, but that’s not a rank anyone can obtain.”

“…Thank you very much.” Rio thanked her shyly.

“But… I’m a little worried,” Celia said with a somber look.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m referring to Alphonse. He might force some weird accusation on you, Rio.”

“Well, yes.”

“I know you’re more than aware of this, but many of the students in this academy are very competitive — they really hate to lose. When you combine that with the perceptions of social standing peculiar to nobility, it gets very troublesome. For example, others might throw tantrums like Alphonse did today.”

“Other than early on in my enrollment, things had been peaceful up until today,” Rio said with a small, strained smile.

“They probably provoked you out of curiosity at first, then got bored fairly soon afterwards. That, and they saw you as clearly below them. They must have said all kinds of things to you — you did well not giving in to them.”

“I didn’t want to add fuel to the fire with my reaction,” Rio replied with a small shrug.

“Exactly. You shouldn’t take on more than one predicament at a time. But this time, the exams must’ve made all of them reconsider their perspective of you. They’ll see you as a threat to their position now. That’s why you’ll face even greater troubles from here on,” Celia said with a gloomy expression.

“Even so, I’ll be all right. I’m already used to it,” Rio replied detachedly.

“But… noble bullying can get nasty, you know?” Celia had

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

a worried look on her face. Perhaps she was speaking from her own experience — that thought passed through Rio's mind.

"I've heard that you were an excellent student. Did you go through similar issues, perhaps?"

"Well… human relationships can be complicated. I did receive some choice words from a girl in a higher-ranked family than mine."

"Were they difficult to endure?"

"Absolutely not. I just ignored them all."

Rio huffed a small laugh at Celia's blunt reply. "That's what I thought."

"Hey, it was still a big deal! Though in my case, I still had friends by my side, so it turned out okay… The one I'm worried about is *you*!" Celia puffed out her cheeks.

"Then I'll be fine," Rio said with a grin.

"…Why?" *Had Rio made friends somewhere she wasn't aware of?* Celia thought. But her assumption was slightly off from Rio's answer.

"Because I have you," Rio stated unabashedly.

Celia blanked out for a moment. "Eh? Ah, umm…"

Suddenly overcome with embarrassment, Celia looked down as she blushed red.

"…Ah! Y-You're making fun of me, aren't you? Treating me like a child!" Unable to withstand the silence, she eventually spoke up.

"Of course not. You're the older one here, Professor."

"That's true, but… I feel like I was just treated like a child! Since — I mean — you were trying to say that I'm your friend, right?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?" Rio asked, staring at Celia intently — but she was unable to meet Rio's eyes.

"Uh…"

"Oh, but I also think of you as a professor, of course. If you're uncomfortable with that, I can try to put a little more

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

distance between us…” Rio continued on as Celia appeared tongue-tied. Then, Celia opened her mouth and let out a hoarse sound.

“I’m not…”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not… uncomfortable.”

This time, Rio could hear her clearly, but he decided to tease her a little anyway.

“Please, say it one more time.”

“Ugh…” Celia flushed red as Rio peered at her face.

“Professor?”

“I’m saying I’m not uncomfortable with it! You meanie! Read between the lines, geez!” Celia wailed with flushed cheeks, her embarrassment seeming to have reached its peak.

“I’m sorry. I really wanted to hear it clearly, so I couldn’t help myself,” Rio apologized with a giggle.

“Hmph!” Celia turned away and side-eyed Rio with a glare.

“If I ever have troubles with other people, please give me your advice as my teacher and my friend.”

“F-Fine. I’ll lend you my shoulder to cry on when you’ve been bullied to tears,” Celia replied to Rio’s request, glancing over at him.

“It’s a good thing your tiny size makes you the perfect height to cling to.”

“D-Don’t call me tiny! I’m still growing!” Celia reddened as she argued back. Once more, Rio laughed happily.

Eventually, Celia laughed too.

His days might have been repetitive, but they were also fulfilling, Rio thought. There was nothing special about them, yet they were irreplaceable. They were something Rio had lost long ago.

While the quietly burning desire for revenge wouldn’t disappear from his heart, just being able to laugh like this

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

made his heart feel a bit lighter. Perhaps that was why — Rio thought. That was why he wanted these days to continue. He knew they couldn't continue forever, but it'd be nice if they could continue for a little longer. But despite Rio's feelings, his days at the academy passed by in the blink of an eye.

The results from his exam had caused the students' distaste for him to intensify all at once, exactly as he had expected, and from there, several things happened. Rio discovered that while he could perform sorcery, he was mocked for his complete ineptitude at obtaining magic. Noble daughters would confess their feelings to him as he aged, but his refusals led to the spread of nasty rumors.

The bullying got exponentially worse than before.

Despite all of this, Rio continued to move forward.

He couldn't afford to stop and stand still.

No — he was terrified of standing still.

He didn't know if he was truly moving forward or not, but it all felt easier when he threw himself into something. Amidst such worries and uncertainties, his teatime with Celia was the only occasion where he could laugh from the bottom of his heart, making it feel both long and short.

Thus, five years passed by...

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 5: Five Years Later

Once he had turned twelve, Rio moved up into the sixth grade of the primary division of the Royal Academy of Beltrum. Aside from a few core classes, the senior years at the Academy were mostly comprised of electives, which the students chose themselves and had to complete in order to acquire the necessary credits to graduate.

Rio was currently attending one of his elective courses: swordcraft. The senior students were gathered at the Academy's proving grounds.

"All right, I have an announcement to make before we begin today's training. As you may know, a tournament is held annually with the knights of our kingdom... And this year's tournament is coming up." The students began to buzz at the instructor's words.

The tournament between the Academy students and the knights of the kingdom was nearly a festival-like event. Spectators were welcomed from outside the Academy to watch the grand matches between student representatives from the swordcraft course and the cream of the crop from the kingdom's military. The participating knights were all renowned elites that the students stood no chance against under normal circumstances — but they purposefully did not fight too seriously in the tournament, which allowed balanced matches to take place every year.

Ultimately, the goal was to give the students confidence and experience by letting them cross swords with the most skillful members of the military. It was a great honor for the participating student representatives, and the students who showed promise in the tournament could even be recruited

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

early by the knighthood.

“The primary school division representatives were selected from this class. I will now announce their names — respond and step forward if you hear your name. First are the sixth years: Alphonse Rodan, Damien Basque, Jean Aaron—”

Rio watched on indifferently as the instructor listed off the names one after another to the cheers of the selected students. But then—

“ —and Rio.”

Rio’s eyes widened with surprise when he realized his name had been called. The students around him began stirring noisily.

“From the fifth years is Stewart Huguenot. That’s all.” The instructor ignored the commotion among the students and wrapped up the announcement.

“Wait a minute! I cannot accept this!” a voice suddenly protested. It was Alphonse Rodan.

“What’s wrong, Alphonse? Are you dissatisfied with the idea of representing the class?” the instructor asked, looking at Alphonse.

“That’s not it! S-Sir, I cannot accept that the commoner was selected as a class representative. It would be an embarrassment to have him challenge the knights as our representative. He’s a dunce that can’t even use magic!” Alphonse blurted out, his words scornful about Rio.

“Magic ability is not part of the selection criteria. This choice was made by prioritizing swordcraft ability.”

“Swordcraft ability? Are you suggesting that the commoner has a decent sword arm?” Alphonse asked with a sneer.

“That’s right.” The instructor nodded without hesitation. His reply made the other students frown alongside Alphonse.

“...I’m afraid I find that hard to believe. He’s a simpleton

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

with no talent to show for."

"That's not something for you to judge. The decision has already been made — your objections are overruled."

"…Yes, sir." Alphonse nodded with a sullen expression at the instructor's curt phrasing.

Entry into the swordcraft course meant that during martial arts class, the instructor's words were final. The aim of this was to teach military discipline — that the higher ranks were the ones that made decisions. Rio himself wanted to object to his participation in the tournament as a representative of the Academy, but the aforementioned military discipline prevented him from speaking up.

"We shall now begin our training. Grab your weapons and march for five clicks. Move it!"

At the instructor's orders, the class began for the day.

◇◇◇

"I heard the rumors… You're participating in the congenial tournament with the kingdom knights?" Celia happily brought up the topic during their tea party in the research lab one day after school.

"Yes, I was selected for some reason," Rio replied without much zeal.

"'For some reason'? Show a little more enthusiasm! If you do well in the matches, you could be scouted by the knighthood before your graduation."

"Yeah, but I don't intend on becoming a knight anyway," Rio replied with a wry smile.

"Really? I know they say the work is exhausting, but gaining the title of 'knight' will provide you with status and a stable income. It's not a bad deal."

"I'm not interested in those things. There's something else I want to do after I graduate," Rio said. He took a sip of his tea in a refined manner. Celia was impressed by how natural

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

his movements had become.

"Oh, really?" Celia interjected with curiosity, briefly wondering whether it was appropriate to dig deeper before deciding to ask him outright. "Your graduation is less than a year away now. What do you want to do after that?"

"I'm thinking of going on a journey in the near future. There's a place I've always wanted to visit."

"Huh? You're going to leave the kingdom?" Rio's answer shocked Celia. She hadn't even considered the possibility that he would leave the country.

"Well, it would be a bit difficult for me to stay in this country."

"That… might be true, but…"

Most of those problems could be resolved by becoming a knight. Not to mention—

"…Hey, why don't you come work in my laboratory? I'm not sure I can function without you here anymore," Celia said as she looked around the room.

Five years had passed since Celia and Rio met.

At first, the mess of Celia's research lab had been an unbearable sight for Rio, but after countless visits, he simply went about cleaning up the room on his own. As a result, Celia was more than well aware of how refined Rio's life skills were. These days, Rio not only managed the state of the room, but helped out in everything from taking care of everyday necessities, to assisting with her research. He had become an irreplaceable partner to Celia.

"You're a noble of age, Professor Celia. Shouldn't you have a marriage proposal or two by now? You shouldn't have a commoner of unknown origins in your research laboratory all the time."

"I don't have any intention of marrying for a while yet. My family has been noisy about it, but I've been using my research as an excuse to reject all talks of marriage," Celia uttered wearily at the mention of marriage. Seeing her like

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

that made Rio smile with a giggle.

“Well, the decision of when to marry is completely up to you, but…”

“Aah! You think I’ll be past my prime if I wait, don’t you?!”

“I said no such thing.”

In this world, the ideal age range for a noblewoman to marry was between their mid-teens to 20 years old. Celia was currently seventeen. While it seemed way too young to Rio with his residual Japanese perceptions, Celia had entered her ideal marriage years already.

That being said, someone of Celia’s remarkable talent and extremely high status would have no trouble finding a marriage partner well into their twenties.

“Hmph! What’s with that, anyway? All the men of this kingdom seem to think I’ll be past my prime once I’m in my twenties… Do they really like younger girls that much?” Celia muttered bitterly. The topic of marriageable age really seemed to bother her.

“Well, I personally think the ideal age for noblewoman is too early. And you’re young and cute in appearance, so I think you’re fine.”

“…Are you saying I look like a child?” With her tiny frame and short stature, Celia still looked like she was in her early teens — not much different as when Rio had first met her. Apparently, she was a little bothered by this too.

“You’re a very mature woman, Professor,” Rio said with a soft smile. Celia blushed furiously.

“Oh, you. Don’t be silly…”

Smiling at the blushing Celia, Rio picked up the empty teapot and went about preparing a new batch. He knew exactly how to make it the way Celia liked; long years of hanging out with the tea-fussy noble had made his tea preparation abilities on par with that of a butler, and he could proudly say that any noble daughter would be satisfied

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

with his abilities.

Just as Rio was considering what type of tea to pour next, Celia spoke up.

“B-By the way, where were you thinking of going?” she asked in an attempt to cover up her embarrassment from earlier.

“My parents’ homeland — the Yagumo region.”

“…Huh? The Yagumo region? That’s… beyond the Wilderness, isn’t it?” Celia eyes widened at the name of Rio’s destination.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I only know as much as what I’ve read in books, but that place doesn’t even have proper diplomatic relations! It’s far, there are no roads, no maps, and there are dangerous creatures… you’d be risking your life if you go.”

Celia’s words implicitly expressed her disbelief towards Rio’s intentions to go. That was how remote the Yagumo region was to the people of the Strahl region.

East of the Strahl region was a vast expanse of land known as the Wilderness — a neutral zone outside the control of humans. The Yagumo region was located just beyond. Throughout history, ambassadors and expedition teams had left Strahl for Yagumo through the Wilderness, but most of them gave up midway and returned. The number of successful instances where people reached Yagumo and returned could be counted on one hand. Any rational person wouldn’t even consider making the journey.

“Well, it’s just a plan for now. I’d have to make the proper preparations before heading out, of course. My parents were able to make it here, so the trip itself can’t be impossible,” Rio said calmly.

“You… don’t seem to be joking, but… Yagumo, huh…”

Perhaps the matter was too far in the future to consider, or the destination was too unfamiliar to her, as Celia couldn’t quite process the idea. In her heart, she naively

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

believed that Rio would either give up once he realized how harsh the journey would be, or that he wasn't entirely serious about it. But Celia was unaware of Rio's motive for heading to the Yagumo region — his past.

◇◇◇

Finally, the day of the tournament arrived.

"Hey, Rio. Don't you mess this up. If you fight pathetically in your match, it'll reflect badly on us too. Honestly, this is such a drag."

"I agree. Why was such a weakling selected to compete? The instructor's orders may be absolute, but I still cannot comprehend it."

The students that were to participate in the tournament were gathered in a waiting room, loudly expressing their disdain. The ones leading the barrage of verbal abuse towards Rio were Alphonse Rodan, the sixth year student, and Stewart Huguenot, the fifth year student. Both were sons of great lords that represented the kingdom, making them very influential figures within the Academy. Nothing could have been more irksome than having those two lead the onslaught of insults. However, Rio was already used to their shrewd tactics. He had endured more than enough insults in the years since his enrollment to easily brush off the nobles.

"I am aware the role that has been bestowed upon me is unfitting for one of my status. I will endeavor to avoid an unsightly match that would bring shame upon everyone. Please, give me your mercy."

"Hmph. I haven't the slightest expectations for your performance — just prepare yourself for the worst if you drag us through the mud. That's all."

"Of course," Rio agreed, completely unfazed by Alphonse's threat. Just then, the door to the waiting room opened.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“It’s time. You’re up, Rio.” The swordcraft instructor came in.

“Yes, sir.” Rio immediately rose to his feet and placed a hand over his chest, using the appropriate response etiquette.

The tournament format consisted of five matches that took place one after another; it had been decided that Rio would go first. Huge crowds of spectators and students were packed into the stands of the arena where the tournament was being held, their gazes fixed on the center of the field. It was there that Rio and his opponent faced each other to exchange a few brief words before the first match unfolded. The knight took one look at Rio’s face and widened his eyes in a look of surprise — which quickly turned to an expression of annoyance.

“Hmph. I knew you were enrolled into the Academy, but I never imagined you’d be the one to face me.”

“It’s good to see you again.” Despite being similarly surprised to see his opponent, Rio still greeted him in a calm voice.

“Oho, so you remember me. It’s been five years since our last encounter.”

“Yes. Thank you for taking care of me back then, Lord Charles.”

The knight’s name was Charles Arbor — the man who tortured Rio in the name of an interrogation five years ago.

“My apologies. My position at the time required me to use a harsher method of investigation.” Charles looked down at Rio with a sadistic sneer.

“It’s fine, I’ve put it behind me. If I recall, you were terribly flustered at the time — if anything, I’m the one who should express my apologies to you, Lord Charles, for not being of more use to you,” Rio said with a forced grin.

Despite his efforts, Charles had failed to redeem himself for Flora’s kidnapping case and was severely demoted in

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

rank. He had recovered some of his status in the past five years, but it didn't compare to when he had been in line to be the next commander of the Royal Guard. There was no reason for Charles to feel resentful toward Rio over what had happened, but it wouldn't have been strange for Charles to unjustly pin his resentment on him, considering the circumstances at the time.

Sure enough, Charles narrowed his eyes and glared at Rio with contempt. His mood had been fouled by the scathing sarcasm behind Rio's words.

"...Let us have a good match today, then," Charles said in a frosty voice. He made no move to shake hands.

"Yes, let's. I will fight you with everything I have."

"I accept your challenge. There's no need to feel intimidated by my rank in the Royal Guard — being daunted by our differences in experience will only lead to your demise," Charles informed him with a cold sneer.

"Yes, that is my intention," Rio answered in a voice so calm, it bordered on daring. Charles' expression fell carefully blank.

"We will now begin the match. Both sides, draw your training swords."

Prompted by the referee standing between them, Rio and Charles drew the swords hanging by their waists. Charles had a one-handed sword with a shield, while Rio simply wielded a longsword.

"A bastard sword, huh. It suits you," Charles said with a provoking grin.

The longsword was a weapon that could be wielded as both a one-handed sword or a two-handed one — at the cost of being more difficult and tiring to use. Rio had opted for this sword because he didn't use shields.

"The rules are exactly as they were explained to you before. Magic is forbidden — make sure to only fight with your swordcraft abilities."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“I understand.”

“Understood.”

Once Rio and Charles had both nodded in agreement, the referee raised his right hand high into the air.

“Both sides, take your places.”

Rio and Charles backed up until there was about 30 feet of space between them, then readied their swords.

“Ready… begin!” The referee gave the signal and lowered his hand.

“Haaah!” Charles immediately took off charging towards Rio.

I guess he has no intention of sharing the glory. Fine by me. Rio’s lips curled into a cold smile as he sensed Charles’ intensity, although Rio wasn’t exactly a saint. He held the same amount of fury as anyone else would over the brutal and unjust treatment he received from Charles. Perhaps his fury would have subsided with a proper apology, but their conversation just now proved that wasn’t happening. He hadn’t had much enthusiasm for the tournament to begin with, but now that he was here, Rio decided to bring about as much humiliation for the knight as he could.

At that point, Charles had finished closing the distance between them, whereas Rio had yet to move a single step. It probably appeared as though he had been overwhelmed by Charles’ intensity, causing him to react one step too late. Perhaps Charles had thought the same, as he smiled as though his victory was assured.

He truly had no intention of holding back at all.

Charles swung with all his might in a strike aimed to mow down Rio’s torso. No matter how effective healing magic was, the force behind his attack would’ve done some serious damage if it made contact.

With a small sigh, Rio saw through the attack and took half a step back to just barely evade Charles’ sword. It slashed through empty space, exactly as he had calculated.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

In the next instant, Rio spotted an opening at Charles' right side and stepped forward to his left, jabbing out his sword.

"!"

The shock was evident on Charles' face as he tried to use the momentum of his first swing for a follow-up attack fueled by panic. But the point of the sword in Rio's left hand reached its destination first — Charles' neck. The blunt blade of the training sword stopped mere millimeters away from digging into his skin.

The match had been decided in a single counterattack.

A silence fell over the arena. Everyone was completely dumbfounded by the result no one had expected.

"S-Stop there! The victor is the Academy representative, Rio!" The referee announced in a high-pitched voice.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

And yet—

“W-Wait! I wasn’t ready just now! Let me do it in earnest!”

Unable to accept how easily his defeat had been decided, Charles raised a flustered objection. He was so shocked, he spoke without even considering what he would look like demanding a rematch against a young student opponent he’d lost to. While the observers could clearly see his humiliating loss, the damage would have been lessened if he had assumed the position of giving the student the glory.

“Hey, this is some kind of mistake. This isn’t right!”

“S-Sorry, a loss is a loss…” The referee seemed troubled by Charles’ deranged protests.

“You fool! A loss is a loss. An honorable Royal Knight would accept his loss without dispute.” Someone had suddenly stepped onto the field to scold Charles.

“S-Sir Alfred… No, Commander Alfred.” Charles gritted his teeth in a sour expression at the sight of the voice’s owner.

Alfred Emerle.

The man who had assumed the Commander position that should have belonged to Charles through his connections, and Charles’ superior. He was also Vanessa’s older brother.

“Your pride may have made you complacent, but for you to actually be defeated so easily is pathetic. If you can feel the eyes of the spectators right now, accept your defeat graciously and step down,” Alfred said in a cold voice.

With a gasp, Charles glanced around at his surroundings before flushing red. He calmed down a bit as the shame of the situation rushed into him all at once.

“I-It’s my loss,” Charles accepted his defeat in a squeaky voice and bowed his head.

“Thank you very much,” Rio returned the gesture.

Once their exchange was over, Charles turned on his heel and immediately rushed off the field. The matches

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

proceeded smoothly after that, and the tournament ended without incident.

In the end, the only one that achieved a win against the knights was Rio.

The knights guided the students through the rhythm of their blade swings to ensure that their matches were good and fair, but none of them were willing to lose on purpose. While the number of wins and losses against the knights were usually even every year, Charles' disgraceful behavior seemed to have influenced their conduct. As a result of being the only student to earn a victory against the knights, attention inescapably gathered on Rio.

◇◇◇

At Duke Arbor's residence in the capital, Charles drank with another man in his personal quarters.

"Damn those infuriating Huguenot men. Making a fool out of me!" Charles cursed as he took a swig of his liquor, his red face making him seem intoxicated already. He was in a bad mood after the humiliation and shame he had suffered in the tournament that day.

"Heheh. Please calm your wrath, my lord." The man sitting across from Charles gave him a serene smile. He looked to be in his mid-thirties.

"...Mr. Reiss. My apologies for behaving in such an unsightly manner," Charles said, a little ashamed of himself.

"I can imagine how you must be feeling. It is fairly normal to give the students the glory in matches like these... You must be frustrated to hear others say what they please."

"T-That's right! It's a virtue not to be fixated on winning or losing in exhibition matches. Yet those weak-kneed nobles that know nothing of swordcraft were all swayed by the words of that Huguenot..." Charles started to speak rapidly, spurred on by Reiss' sympathy.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“They are simply envious of your ability, Lord Charles. Let them say what they wish. Now is not the time to draw attention to yourself.” Reiss’ words appeared to have touched upon Charles’ ego, as his expression relaxed slightly.

“But now the Huguenot family has built momentum. Not even His Majesty can ignore their opinions anymore.” Charles looked at Reiss inquisitively.

“Yes, it would be unfavorable for our kingdom to have Duke Huguenot continue gathering strength like this. These last five years have proved his capabilities to be exceptional. However, he must have a weakness somewhere.”

“Five years, huh…” Charles’ expression twisted in displeasure, seemingly able to recall bad memories during that time.

“Come to think of it, Duke Huguenot came into power after the incident five years ago. Weren’t you deeply involved with that case too, Lord Charles?”

“…I suppose you could say that. Actually, the student I faced today was the one suspected for being involved in Her Highness’ kidnapping. I was the one who interrogated him back then.”

“Oho, so he’s the one…” There was an interested gleam in Reiss’ eye.

“And he was quite a stubborn brat back then too. No matter how much pain I inflicted, he refused to confess. There were some suspicious parts of his testimony that didn’t match up with the situation at the time, so I thought he’d crack with some… *forceful encouragement*.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He hung around the gang of thugs that kidnapped the princess, yet he was the only one alive when they were murdered. He testified that the thugs were killed by an assassin of unknown origins, yet he also claimed that the one who defeated the assassin was none other than himself.”

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“I see. That is indeed suspicious.”

“The investigation was terminated after he was declared Her Highness’ savior. If only I had made that brat confess…” Charles’ face twisted even more as the irritation from that time resurfaced. He refilled his metal glass with liquor and gulped it down.

“It sounds like you and that boy are fated rivals.”

“Haha! If today’s tournament had been a real battle, I would have cut him down without a thought.” The alcohol seemed to be taking its effect on him, making Charles boast cheerfully. Reiss turned up his lips in a faintly joyous smile.

“That is impressive indeed. Let us use that spirit to turn the tides against Duke Huguenot,” he said as he exchanged a toast with Charles.

◇◇◇

The day after the tournament, Celia had prepared special tea and snacks to celebrate Rio’s victory after class. As she was making her way from a middle school class back to the research lab, she spotted Rio in a connecting hallway and opened her mouth to call out to him.

“Oh! Rio…”

Her words trailed off when she realized he was walking next to a female student.

It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say that Rio was at the very bottom of the Academy food chain. That was why he was very rarely seen with other students — if he was, then it was usually because he had been dragged into some kind of predicament. It was even rarer for him to be seen with a female student.

Her encounter with such an unexpected scene made Celia’s thoughts cease for a few seconds; in that time, Rio and the female student walked off together. They seemed to be moving to somewhere more isolated.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

W-What should I do… He hasn't been dragged into something weird again, has he? Celia glanced around nervously. Once she had confirmed that there was no one else around, she quietly snuck off after the two.

They had relocated behind the library tower. Rio and the female student stopped walking once they arrived at the deserted area.

"U-Um! P… Please read this!" The female student suddenly took out a letter and awkwardly offered it to Rio.

"…Sure, I can do that. What's in it?"

"Y-You were really cool in your match yesterday!" At Rio's inquiry to the contents of the letter, the female student blushed and blurted out her words in a rush.

"Oh, right. Thank you very much." In the end, he still had no idea what the letter was about, but Rio thanked the girl in confusion anyway.

"T-The rest is written in the letter. Bye!" Unable to bear the awkwardness between them, the girl rushed off without waiting for Rio's reply.

"Huh? W-Wait!" Rio called after her in a hurry, but she made no attempt to stop.

"Okay then…" Rio muttered with a troubled face.

The envelope in his hand felt strangely heavy. Perhaps it was a love letter after all, considering the circumstances… Would he have to read it and write a reply? The thought of having more stress pushed onto him made him feel slightly weighed down.

"Umm. Hey, Rio…" Just then, Celia appeared out of nowhere.

"Professor… Were you watching that just now?"

"A-Ahaha. I knew it was a bad thing to do, but I thought maybe you were being dragged into more trouble… I-I'm sorry!" Celia admitted, bowing her head deeply in apology. She could have gotten away with it if she had quietly left the scene, but the guilt of eavesdropping had made her reveal

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

herself.

Rio gave a small forced laugh. “Please raise your head. You were worried about me, weren’t you?”

Celia hesitantly raised her head at Rio’s words. “Y-Yeah. And… I actually wanted to celebrate your victory…”

“…Huh? Oh, wow… you shouldn’t have.” Rio responded with reserved gratitude, his eyes widened at little at Celia’s hesitant words.

“N-Nonsense, just participating in the tournament was an honorable feat… Anyone would celebrate such a thing, so you have to as well, Rio. Moreso since you won — now, come on!” Celia said. She grabbed Rio’s hand on the spur of the moment and started to briskly walk away.

“W-Wait, Professor—” Rio was pulled along into walking with her. They continued to hold hands.

Celia’s pace was faster than usual, and she seemed to be acting a bit odd. Her hand was also kind of sweaty — maybe because she was nervous. A silence fell over them for a while as Rio curiously observed Celia’s face from his position diagonally behind her. He noticed that her cheeks were slightly red.

“Do you have a fever, Professor?” Rio asked her worriedly.

“Huh? N-Not that I know of, why?”

“Your face seems kind of red. And your hand is a bit warm,” Rio said, squeezing her hand gently.

“Ah! Umm, sorry! You probably don’t like that, right?” Celia pulled her hand away, flustered.

“That’s not true. I just don’t want you pushing yourself too hard.” With a faint look of surprise, Rio smiled softly and shook his head.

“R-Right. Thank you. But I’m fine, really.”

“If you’re not feeling well, you should rest.”

“I-I’m fine! Come on, let’s go.” Celia hastily walked off again.

Her steps were even faster than before, and the side view

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

of her face was redder too.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

The two of them eventually arrived at Celia's research lab, and Rio went about his usual motions to prepare the tea. There was a simple kitchen in Celia's lab, and with the tea set, she was able to drink tea any time.

"I'll prepare the tea you chose for today, then."

"Yes, please. It's Amur tea."

"That's quite the high quality item you prepared for today, Professor."

Amur was a place famous for producing tea; the tea leaves made there were regarded as the highest class of leaves possible.

"Of course. We're going to toast to your victory in the tournament, after all. I also prepared some cookies to go with the tea, so that's something to look forward to!" Celia said in a lively voice.

She seemed to be back to her usual self. Rio beamed with a huff of laughter, and continued to work silently for a while. Once the tea was done, he placed the teapot and heated teacups onto a tray and carried it to the desk in the center of the room. Just as he sat down, Celia spoke.

"Thank you for always doing this."

"No problem. More importantly—" Rio stared at Celia intently.

"W-What is it?" Celia asked in a high-pitched voice after a few seconds of their stare-off.

"You're looking a lot better now."

"...Huh? O-Oh, right. Yeah. Maybe." Celia blinked blankly for a moment before reaching up to pat at her cheeks in a fluster. "I-It was nothing, really. I'm not even sure what came over me... I was just lost in my thoughts. Don't worry about it." Celia gestured wildly in her denial.

"Is that so... All right, then." Rio tilted his head and watched her.

"So about that girl just now — did she confess to you?"

"Yes, probably... I guess. I was given a letter, but..." Rio

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

seemed rather bashful about the sudden change in topic.

"Good for you! That means girls are paying attention to you, no matter what everyone else is saying about you. Are you going to start off as friends?" Celia asked, glancing at Rio's face to gauge his reaction. Underneath her words, she could feel a dull, prickling pain stab into her chest.

However…

"No, I don't believe it's a good idea to form those kinds of relationships."

"H-Huh? Why not?" Celia was taken aback by how plainly Rio answered.

"Any girls that get close to me would end up ostracized by the others." With a bitter smile, Rio picked up the teapot and poured the tea. Soon, the steaming cups lined side-by-side were releasing a fragrant scent into the air, tickling at their noses.

"Here you go."

"…Thank you." Celia thanked him and took a sip of her tea before continuing to speak. "…But don't you think that she might have wanted to be your friend anyway? Wasn't that why she wrote the letter?" she asked with an earnest gaze.

"There's no way our surroundings would allow that." A troubled smile played at Rio's lips. His decision was rational and realistic… Celia had a worried look on her face.

"Well, I guess… but still. Aren't you curious at all? You've reached that age where boys want to get closer to girls. And there are lots of cute girls in this academy."

"That kind of thing is difficult for me — I'm just not interested." Rio smiled bitterly, shaking his head without hesitation.

Based on his reaction, Celia could see he was truly uninterested. Nevertheless, it shouldn't have been that easy to cut off all interest in the opposite sex, especially at Rio's age. Even Celia would sometimes find herself daydreaming about her ideal love, just like any other person… Yet the boy

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

in front of her seemed so sure of himself.

Puzzled, Celia wondered why. Was he really just apathetic? Or did he have someone else on his mind that turned him off from every other girl?

Does Rio have someone he likes? The thought suddenly came across Celia's thoughts, but she couldn't think of anyone who would fit that bill. Rio didn't even have friends at the academy.

The only one he talks to is me, after all.

Right, Rio didn't have anyone other than Celia to talk to. Her focus on her research meant that the reverse applied to Celia too — but she shelved that thought away for now.

When Rio wasn't in class, eating, or sleeping, he was either in the library or practicing with his sword outside. He was alone every time she saw him. There were no signs of other girls around him besides Celia, which was why she couldn't imagine Rio having an interest in someone. She didn't even consider it a plausible possibility.

Rio wasn't the type to speak up for himself, however, so it was hard to tell what he was thinking. Was he oblivious to the kindness of others, or had the negativity from his surroundings caused him to lose trust in people? Either way, Celia thought it was a very sad thing to bear. While it wasn't her place to interfere, Celia was the only one who knew how hard Rio had worked these last five years.

That was why she wanted him to be happy.

The reason she had been so shaken earlier was because of… protective maternal feelings rising up.

Yes, that had to be it.

Celia told herself this as her chest fluttered uneasily. She sipped at her tea and took deep breaths to calm herself down.

"Come to think of it, it's almost the season for the outdoor drill. What kind of drill will you be doing this year?" she casually changed the topic.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

The outdoor drill was a practical exam designed to test the prowess of their military training at the Academy. The drill and location of the exam varied each year, but the team battle system remained constant. The fifth and sixth years formed several squads focused around the sixth years and would undergo the exam together.

The lands outside of the humans' jurisdiction were overrun with monsters, bandits, and other savage creatures, making safety the utmost concern, as most of the participants were royalty and nobility. Prior to the exam, the test zone would be scoured in advance to drive out all of the dangerous entities. Off-duty knights would then guard the border during the exam.

"We're going to march through the mountain forest."

"Eww. The mountain forest... That's impossible for me. I have enough trouble walking to class from here." Celia slumped across the desk as if the thought alone was enough to wear her out.

"You need to exercise more, Professor Celia," Rio said with a dry smile.

Celia rarely left her research lab outside of her classes. Even for a noble daughter, her lack of exercise was alarming.

"Ahaha. Maybe once my research settles down." Celia evaded the suggestion with a forced laugh.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 6: The Outdoor Drill

While the day of the outdoor drill was fast approaching, Rio was currently attending one of the elective classes for fifth and sixth years. The name of the course was “General Theory of Sorcery” — and Celia was the class instructor. It was a course that was typically avoided, as it was difficult with no practical use. And yet, because Celia was the one teaching it this year, there were more students enrolled than ever before.

Despite turning seventeen, Celia’s outward appearance had stopped progressing beyond middle school-age, making her indiscernible from her students. On top of that, her alluringly cute appearance, coupled with her friendly personality, meant her popularity as an instructor was through the roof. As a result, many of the students in the room — particularly the male students — had selected the class not because of their burning desire for knowledge, but because Celia was the one teaching it.

There were currently forty students — including Rio — in the classroom. Among the female students were Christina and Roanna, as well as Flora, who was from the year below the others.

“First, I’d like to ask everyone for their definition of sorcery. Let’s see… how about Princess Christina. What do you think?”

“Sorcery is a technique that manipulates magic essence and spell formulae to cause a variety of phenomena to occur,” Christina said, immediately offering her own interpretation.

“Ooh, what a wonderful first response. Brilliant, Your

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Highness.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Christina answered modestly with a cool expression.

“Sorcery can be defined from many different perspectives, but the definition Princess Christina gave is the most general. There are also definitions that focus on the activation process of sorcery, but what kind of process is that exactly? —Mr. Stewart?” Celia called on Stewart, who eagerly stood up to answer.

“Yes, Professor. Sorcery is activated by pouring magic essence into a spell formula.”

“Close. I’d give that answer 80 out of 100 points. What do you think you’re missing?”

“I’m… not sure.” Lost for words, Stewart frowned in frustration.

“Rio, then. What about you?”

“If the formula for essence control cannot be created, then there’ll be a need to control the essence being poured in. Sorcery will not activate if that control fails.”

“Correct. 100 points.” Celia gave a satisfied beam at Rio’s smooth answer, while Stewart’s expression quietly darkened.

“So what is spell formulae? Miss Roanna.”

“Yes, Professor. Spell formulae are said to be formulae that can alter the world.”

“Correct. Wonderful answer.”

“Thank you very much, Professor,” Roanna said, blushing happily at Celia’s compliment.

“Sorcery is activated by controlling the magic essence within our bodies to manipulate formulae, which can alter our world. It’s almost like the work of god, right? Well, the formulae themselves were created by the Six Wise Gods, so that’s not entirely wrong to say.”

Every student in the classroom was hanging onto Celia’s words.

The Six Wise Gods were the beings that the people of

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Strahl worshiped. They credited these gods for contributing to the history and development of the region. Even Rio knew of the Six Wise Gods, but unfortunately, his life as an orphan meant that his belief in them was extremely weak.

"You may already know this, but essence control is also markedly related to the formula contract that is needed to acquire and use magic. Lower class magic can be grasped simply by instinct, but a high level of essence control is essential to acquiring and using magic of a higher difficulty."

"Professor!" Stewart raised his hand to ask a question after Celia's evenly-worded explanation.

"Yes, Mr. Stewart?"

"You mentioned that essence control is related to formula contracts for acquiring magic. Does this mean that those with inferior essence control cannot acquire magic at all?" Stewart looked at Rio with a mocking grin. This caused the students around him to giggle, but Rio coolly ignored them.

"That is incorrect. Compatibility with formula contracts differs from person to person, so there will be magic you cannot acquire no matter how efficient your essence control is," Celia said with a delicate frown.

The art of magic involved storing the formula inside the body, to be activated at will by chanting its spell name. Simple rites known as "formula contracts" were necessary to store the spell formula inside the body. They were performed by using a special catalyst to draw the contract formula on the ground, standing on it, chanting the spell, then manipulating the essence. If the ritual was successful, the formula would be stored inside the body, which would allow the sorcery to be verbally activated without the need to draw the formula.

Essence capacity had the tendency to be passed on through genetics, and there was a noticeable difference in the power of those who could and couldn't use magic. This meant that those who could use magic were able to receive

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

special privileges more easily, leading young royalty and nobility to believe that magic was limited to the chosen elites. Furthermore, while it was discovered that Rio had sufficient amounts of essence to acquire magic, for some reason, he failed to form any kind of formula contract and was yet to obtain a single magic. His fellow classmates had been growing envious because of the flawless ease with which he accomplished everything, so the focus of all the ridicule directed towards him suddenly shifted — Rio's inability to use magic proved he wasn't one of the chosen ones.

"I see. So only the chosen ones can acquire magic. Thank you very much, Professor." Stewart sat down smugly, despite the fact that Celia had refuted his statement.

"...Now, back to the lecture. In the first place—" Celia resumed her teaching with a small sigh. The rest of the lecture proceeded smoothly from there until the end of class.

After class...

"That was wonderful, Professor Celia! It's no wonder they call you the 'Genius of the Royal Academy.' Your profound opinions greatly moved me!" Stewart breathed, approaching Celia after class to offer his emotionally-charged opinion.

"Ahaha... Thank you," Celia said with a forced laugh. Meanwhile, Rio was trying to pack up his things as quickly as possible to leave the room, but...

"Oh! Rio—" Celia attempted to call out to him, but Stewart rudely interrupted her.

"Hey, commoner. Why are you taking this class when you can't even use magic? The only thing you have going for your is that silver tongue and brute strength."

Rio stopped and turned around to face Stewart. "I may be unable to acquire magic, but I am still capable of sorcery." This kind of conflict was a daily occurrence for Rio; as usual, he simply shrugged it off.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“That’s not what I mean. I’m referring to the fact that having despicable filth like you in the room poses a danger to the young women here,” Stewart expressed in clear disdain.

“I haven’t the faintest intentions of attempting such befouling actions…” Rio shook his head flatly.

Status, lineage, honor, income: those were the factors that noble daughters considered when seeking a marriage partner. Their entire purpose, one forced onto the girls since birth, was to marry a socially distinguished partner. However, a noble twelve-year-old girl was still just a twelve-year-old girl, so the reality was that many of them were simply more interested in outward appearances than matters of matrimony.

As far as Rio was concerned, he still had a youthful innocence left in his naturally androgynous appearance that had only grown more prominent with the passage of time. Now that he had reached his senior school years, female students would approach him because of his alluring appearance and the sense of rebellion that he seemed to exude. Rio ignored each and every one of those advances, which resulted in unfounded rumors being spread out of resentment. Stewart most likely ate those rumors up with enthusiasm when they were being spread, but they had eventually died down. Or so Rio thought…

“Do not deceive us. There have been recent rumors that you’ve been tricking the girls in my grade,” Stewart said clearly. Rio looked at him in confusion.

“Trick them? I haven’t the slightest recollection of such things…”

Could he be referring to the letter he received from that female student the other day? But he hadn’t tricked her at all… Rio firmly shook his head.

“Hmph. Don’t get full of yourself. You may have been the only one to triumph against a knight during the tournament,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

but that was just a fluke. You got lucky.” Stewart continued to argue against Rio, who easily shrugged the statements off.

The truth was that recently, unbeknownst to Rio, female underclassmen were starting to hold him in a higher regard — all because of his tournament match.

“I am more than aware of that fact.”

“Then don’t step out of line, especially in front of me. Commoners should know their place. You’re an eyesore.”

“I understand. Then I shall endeavor to remain inconspicuous during my classes with you.” Rio bowed to please Stewart, but he remained irritated nonetheless.

“Hmph. You should stop attending the classes that we share altogether,” Stewart said, causing the room to fall silent.

“Mr. Stewart, that’s enough!” Celia interrupted in an angry voice. She had been holding back from intervening out of caution over the possible consequences, but it had escalated to a degree she could no longer overlook.

“Are you siding with him, Professor?” Stewart asked with a sullen expression.

“You are a noble, are you not? Then you must know not to attack others without conclusive evidence. What you are doing now is bullying the weak, plain and simple,” Celia reprimanded firmly.

“Once something happens it will be too late! There are even rumors he’s been making passes at you, Professor,” Stewart insisted.

“Nothing of the sort has ever happened, and as a teacher I would never allow such indecent relations to happen in my classroom anyway,” Celia stated resolutely. Her intensity made Stewart reluctantly back off.

“...If you insist, Professor.”

He shot Rio a glare and left... but not without a final comment to keep him in check.

“Remember this, commoner. If you mess up, you’ll be

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

making an enemy of my family — the House of Duke Huguenot.”

“I shall keep that in mind,” Rio replied. He bowed once to Celia, then left the room.

◇◇◇

The morning of the outdoor drill.

Armed students clad in the uniform of the Royal Academy of Beltrum gathered in a mountain forest area northeast of the capital, two hours away via enchanted airship. There were ten people to a squad, and Rio’s squad was currently holding their pre-drill briefing.

“I will now read out the drill details.”

Alphonse Rodan was the commander and leader of Rio’s squad. Other notable members included Christina, Roanna, Flora, and Stewart.

“This drill takes place during a hypothetical war where an enemy has invaded our kingdom. Our small squad was dispatched to stop the enemy’s troops, but we must retreat from the battlefield by making our way through the mountain forest. In order to avoid our pursuers, speed and covertness is of the utmost importance.” Alphonse opened the map in his hands as he explained.

“The time limit is until sunset today. If we miss that deadline, we’ll lose a lot of points. It goes without saying, then, that the faster we arrive the better.” The drill results had no effect on graduation itself, but receiving good grades for it would be beneficial to those entering the military afterwards.

“And so, ladies and gentlemen, we will be arriving just after noon,” Alphonse announced confidently.

“Just a moment, please,” Roanna objected with a clouded expression. “That might be possible if we assumed a straight route. However, this is the mountain forest — it should take

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

much longer to traverse. Arrival after noon shouldn't be possible."

"Worry not, Lady Roanna. I have already plotted out the shortest route using the old roads." The confident smile on Alphonse's face did not waver.

"...What are you implying? The exam location was only announced yesterday," Roanna said with a doubtful expression.

"One of my family's private soldiers is a former adventurer, you see. He just so happened to know this area well. There were several old shortcuts that I simply informed Alphonse of." Stewart, who had been listening silently until now, spoke up with a triumphant look.

"That's how it is... You could say information is everything in a war. Our grades have been essentially guaranteed with this," Alphonse said with a cheerful grin.

"Well, my personal belief is that this is underhanded and shameful." Roanna maintained her stern expression.

"I also find it unwise to trust information from such unknown sources," Christina added curtly. The words of the princess herself caused Alphonse's mood to darken slightly. "You needn't worry about that, Your Highness. Comparing my map with this map here shows that my information is indeed authentic and very reliable," Stewart responded calmly in place of Alphonse, who had grown somewhat nervous. Christina narrowed her eyes.

"...If we wander onto the older roads, there will be a greater chance of encountering monsters and savage beasts. What are your thoughts on that?" she asked Alphonse.

"This area has undergone a safety check beforehand. The drill requires us to escape our enemy pursuers, so choosing to travel along the older roads makes sense," Alphonse offered hesitantly.

"I see. Fine. You're the commander of this squad, after all — I shall defer to you." Contrary to expectations, Christina

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

backed down easily. She may have had her own opinions, but she wasn't about to challenge the decision of the commander.

"Leave it to me, Your Highness. I promise, we shall obtain the highest score in our year," Alphonse stated respectfully with a sigh of relief.

After that, they moved onto the final checks of their formations and attack plans for monster encounters.

"Hey, Rio — you should feel honored. We've prepared a way for you to be useful despite your inability to use magic. You're in charge of carrying the supplies for our squad," Alphonse said. He directed his gaze towards the bags left a short distance away from them. Two extremely large packs stuffed with supplies were lying on the floor: a backpack and a shoulder bag. They most likely held all the supplies necessary for the drill. There was far too much for a single person to realistically carry, but there was no point in arguing, Rio deduced.

"I understand," he replied, and nodded without objection.

He tentatively tried to lift the backpack and immediately realized it wouldn't take long for his stamina to drain away… But it wouldn't be a problem if he enhanced his strength.

Rio quietly enchanted his physical body. No magic activation formula appeared, which meant that no one realized Rio had strengthened his body.

A girl suddenly appeared next to him. "U-Umm, are you all right? It must be heavy having to carry all that by yourself…"

It was Flora.

She was in the year below Rio and Christina, but in all his time in the academy, Rio had only spoken to her once. Several days after Flora's enrollment, she thanked him for his help in the kidnapping case. Ever since then, he could feel her looking at him on several occasions, but she had never spoken to him again — until today. It was truly a

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

surprise to Rio to have her speak to him now. His eyes widened subtly.

"Umm. Shall I carry some too…?" Flora offered her help as Rio struggled to react.

"No, it's fine. Thank you for your concern." Rio immediately pasted a smile on his face as he gently rejected her.

Flora wasn't a bad person — she had an unusually gentle personality for a member of the highly prejudiced royalty and nobility of Beltrum. But because she had been raised like a princess in a glass palace, her natural disposition was far too soft. She was ignorant of how her actions could affect her surroundings. In this situation, there was no possible way for Rio to accept Flora's offer. If he did, they'd be subjected to the criticisms of those around them. In any case, the bags weren't even a weight Flora could have carried to begin with. Still, Rio did thank her for her good intention.

"Princess Flora, you should not be exchanging words with the commoner," Alphonse suddenly interrupted, meaning to disparage Rio with his words. "Associating yourself with filth like that will only place your image in a negative light."

"That's right, Your Highness. This barbarian has more than enough strength to spare anyway," Stewart chimed in. He stepped between Rio and Flora to increase the distance between them.

Rio bowed once toward them before he walked away to wait for the signal of their departure.

Later, Rio's squad marched along an old road that stretched deep into the forest. No matter how far they walked, there was nothing to see but dense, overgrown vegetation. It was still before noon, but the air was dark and chilly against their skin, filled with high-pitched bird chirps and beastly roars heard in the distance. They startled Flora every time.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Every member of the squad was dressed in their uniform and armed with a weapon, with the exception of Rio, who also carried two additional packs. His burden was incomparably greater than theirs, yet they continued to walk onwards without any consideration for him. Flora would occasionally turn back to look worriedly at him — he took up the rear of the march — but Rio showed no sign of fatigue in his expression.

“Eyes ahead, Flora. Worry about your own stamina,” Christina warned Flora, who was fidgeting restlessly. She kept her voice low and true to the concealment required for the drill.

“B-But sister, this is wrong. Why is he the only one…” Flora said with a look of sadness. Christina’s eyes widened by a fraction at the sight of her timid sister raising an objection.

“He should be equipped with an artifact that enhances his physical abilities.”

“But his essence and stamina can’t last if he keeps it constantly activated. We need to take more breaks, or take turns carrying the supplies…” Flora’s concern over Rio’s burden made Christina’s expression darken.

“Have you forgotten what I told you before you enrolled into the academy? To refrain from associating with him?”

“…I remember. That is why I have followed your words this entire time. But, sister… I don’t understand. Why is he always alone?”

“It is what it is,” Christina replied simply.

“How can you…” Flora was taken aback.

Roanna, who had been listening to their conversation as she walked alongside them, appeared troubled. “In an environment like the Academy, needless association with him will not be of any benefit to either party. This, I am sure he is aware of.”

“W-What are you saying, that can’t be—”

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“It is. Now stop this mindless chatter,” Christina spoke over Flora. “We’re meant to be withdrawing from a war right now, so—”

“Monster!” Alphonse suddenly yelled. The entire squad tensed up.

Monsters. The ecological details of these supernatural creatures were shrouded in mystery. They possessed a certain level of intelligence, but they were hostile towards everything except their kind. Their defining trait was the way their bodies disappeared upon death, leaving behind only a gemstone filled with magic essence — an enchanted gem. The male students — all except Rio — reached for their swords at once and assumed their battle positions. The female students raised their staves, primed and alert. Although they were in the middle of a drill exercise, the battle about to begin was not an exercise.

It was undeniably real.

Monster encounters were an expected part of outdoor drills, however, so the students remained calm and composed.

“No one panic! They’re goblins, and there aren’t many of them. Once the four of you in the front guard raise your physical abilities with your artifacts, we’ll charge forward and crush the enemy.” At Alphonse’s order, the four boys in the front started to chant at once.

“*Augendae Corporis*!”

The bracelet underneath their uniforms started to glow as the sorcery to enchant their physical abilities was activated. The bracelets were a magical artifact that acted as a starting point for the geometric spell formulae to appear and wrap itself around the students.

Artifacts were activated by chanting the spell name in a similar way to magic, but unlike the human body, which could store multiple formulae for magic, artifacts were typically restricted to a single formula. This allowed

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

incompatible people who failed to form a formula contract the ability to use the artifact, but the sorcery could only activate the way the bracelet was set to.

The four boys took off and closed in on the group of goblins — monsters that took on the shape of small, hideous people. In no time at all, they had been defeated.

Goblins were among the weakest monsters that existed; though the students were only around twelve years old, the legitimate combat training they received at the Academy, coupled with their ability-strengthening artifacts, meant the goblins stood no chance. As the bodies of the goblins vanished, an enchanted gem the size of a pebble was left behind.

“Well, that was nothing. It’d take a more formidable monster to stand a chance against us,” Stewart said proudly. The easy victory seemed to have lifted his mood.

“As expected, you can always rely on Stewart. Unlike the useless thing over there.” Alphonse praised Stewart pleasantly before turning his gaze to Rio.

But Rio was staring deeper into the forest and paying absolutely no attention to Alphonse’s words. That seemed to strike a nerve.

“Hey, Rio! The battle’s over. Stop daydreaming or we’ll leave you behind!” Alphonse yelled.

“My sincere apologies,” Rio replied, tearing his eyes away from the forest depths. They immediately resumed their march.

Meanwhile, deep within the forest where Rio had been staring, a lone man was hidden amongst the plant life.

It was Reiss.

He wore a black robe that covered his entire body as he moved as silently as the dead.

“Oh my, that was close. To think he would notice me at this distance… What a child,” Reiss muttered in awe. He actually wanted to draw a little closer than this, but deemed

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

it too risky to do so.

“He might actually be the one who defeated my subordinate five years ago. The secret agent I sent to the House of Duke Huguenot has been working well, so I suppose I could use this chance to test his true strength…” Reiss muttered in delight, his mouth turning up in an eerie, devilish smile.

◇◇◇

Their march progressed smoothly after that. The only monsters they came across were goblins, which posed no real threat; male students vied to show off in front of Christina and the other girls, and would compete with each other over who could defeat the goblins.

The information Stewart had procured turned out to be accurate, making their early afternoon arrival seem more and more realistic with each passing moment.

Unbeknownst to them, however, the seams of their successful afternoon were just waiting to come undone.

The students had grown fatigued from walking around unfamiliar mountain forest terrain, and the goblin eradications they had been so enthusiastic about at first eventually wore down to monotonous chores to deal with. Rio — the one who should have succumbed to exhaustion first — continued to keep a cool, unwavering expression, which prevented the competitive male students from voicing their complaints.

“More goblins. Is it just me, or have their numbers increased?”

“It’s just you. You know the saying: seeing one goblin is a sign of thirty more.” Stewart and Alphonse continued to sound optimistic.

Roughly half an hour later, the woodlands that obstructed

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

their view suddenly disappeared. A clear, blue sky spread endlessly before their eyes.

They had cleared the forest. The goal was right before them — or so they all thought.

The tree line ended at an open area, but beyond that, the forest resumed its spread before them — or rather, below them.

Rio's squad had reached the top of a cliff.

Dumbfounded, they walked up to the edge to look down at the forest roughly 100 feet below them. If they could find a way to reach the bottom, then the goal would be right before them — but trying to descend without climbing ropes was a death wish.

"Hey, doesn't this mean the information was wrong…?"

"Yeah, what are we going to do? Retracing our steps is going to take forever."

Two male students glanced over at Stewart as they muttered to each other. The squad had been moving according to the information Stewart had provided; the thought of all their efforts until now being in vain dampened their spirits.

"Is there something you'd like to say to me?" Stewart asked the whispering students in an irritated voice.

"N-No, nothing of the sort. Right?"

"Right."

The students shook their heads in a hurry. They were both sixth years, but couldn't stand up to a single fifth year boy. Their families couldn't afford to defy Stewart's family — Duke Huguenot's family. Their disgruntled gazes naturally turned towards the commander instead. Alphonse was also from a rather distinguished family — the House of Marquess Rodan — but it fell behind in rank compared to Duke Huguenot's.

"W-What's with that look? If you have a complaint, say it with your mouth," Alphonse threatened the students looking

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

at him.

“Then, may I?” Christina took the initiative and spoke up first.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?” Alphonse’s expression froze at the appearance of the First Princess.

“Which way from here? The path appears to have ended,” Christina asked, seeking an answer for the highest priority issue at hand. Alphonse was thrown off guard, having been certain that she would make a complaint instead. But he soon realized that being criticized directly was the easier route, as he had no idea how to deal with this unexpected turn of events. His mind had been so focused on avoiding the blame, he hadn’t had the time to come up with a solution.

“About that… Umm…”

“You are the commander of this squad. You were the one who advocated the use of Stewart’s questionable information for our strategy, so you must have prepared for such an outcome, no?” Christina questioned plainly as Alphonse struggled to find his words.

“M-My information was not questionable—”

“I am not speaking to you, soldier.”

Stewart tried to get a word in edgewise, but Christina shot him down with resolve. “In the military, the commander’s words are final. This may be a training exercise, but we are following the same rules. If the commander tells us to move forward, then we move forward. I hope you understand that your single command can place the entire squad in danger.”

“Y-Yes ma’am.” Alphonse nodded with a pale face. An unbearable silence fell over the squad.

It was then that it happened.

A single wooden spear came flying out of the forest behind them, piercing the body of a male student.

“Huh…?” The student with the spear in his abdomen uttered a noise of confusion.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Roanna spotted the enemies immediately. “I-It’s an orc! With other monsters too! Ready the defenses!”

Orcs were much more ferocious monsters compared to goblins. They stood over six and a half feet tall and had strength that far surpassed that of a human. They were also known to occasionally move together with goblin mobs.

“F-Front guard! Use your shields to block the spears. Rear guard, cast *Cura* on the injured!” Alphonse promptly commanded, but the monsters made their attack before the students could react. Three spears came flying towards the squad. One struck the ground, while another flew towards Rio. He silently drew the longsword at his waist and sliced it away in an instant. On the other side of the group, the last spear pierced Stewart’s torso. “AAAHH! Take it out — someone take it out!!” Stewart yelled as he thrashed about wildly, beyond all sense of shame or decorum. Panicking from the pain, he lunged towards some male students nearby.

“Whoa! Stop it!”

“H-Hey! Don’t come this way!”

Terrified by Stewart’s bloodstained uniform, the students shoved him away. The force of their push caused him to crash heavily into Flora.

“Kya!”

Flora was in the middle of treating the injured boy from earlier when she was sent flying towards the cliff. She landed right beside the edge. The impact of her hitting the ground caused the unstable cliff edge to crumble away.

“Flora!”

Christina, who had been focused on the monster before her, turned around at the sound of Flora’s scream. Her expression turned to distinct horror when she spotted Flora, moments away from falling off the crumbling cliff edge.

“Eek! H-Help me...!” Flora glanced around for something to grab onto, when she locked eyes with Rio. A pained

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

expression flickered over his face before he threw the equipment off of himself and broke out into a run.

Flora's body had nearly fallen from sight.

Hurry — that was the only thought in his mind as he accelerated to an impossible speed. In an instant, he had reached the cliff edge — and dived off without hesitation. He extend his arm out and grabbed Flora's hand, which had been grasping at thin air. If he gotten there just a second later, he wouldn't have made it in time.

Rio's and Flora's eyes met once more midair. Flora's eyes were teary with relief, but it was still too early to relax. At this rate, they would both end up experiencing ropeless bungee jumping together from 100 feet up — but Rio wouldn't let that happen. He could at least save Flora.

"Sorry," he murmured softly, yanking Flora towards him by the hand he had grabbed. Then, he rotated their bodies around in the air.

"Kya!"

A dainty squeal of surprise could be heard just as Rio used the momentum of his turn to throw Flora back up the cliff with all of his abnormal strength.

"Kyaa!" Flora's body landed at the top of the cliff with a thump. She might have suffered some light scratches, but Rio couldn't do much more than that.

That should be far enough from the edge, Rio thought. With that, the corner of his lip twitched up in a smile. But his relief was only momentary, as the consequences of saving Flora soon caught up to him.

Rio fell to the ground from the top of a 100 foot cliff.

◇◇◇

The members of the squad who had just watched Rio dive off the cliff to save Flora were stunned.

"E-Exterminating the monsters comes first! Alphonse!"

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Roanna was the first to come to her senses and snapped their commander out of his stupor.

"...Defense positions! Men in front, hold your shields and protect Her Highnesses with your wall! Rear guard will launch a barrage of offensive magic. Roanna, you assist with the healing. Take your positions!" Alphonse ordered, reorganizing their formation.

The battle from that point onwards was overwhelmingly one-sided. The front guard became a wall of shields, while the rear guard healed the injured and killed the monsters with their offensive magic.

That much was a given — the ability to use magic made humans far more powerful.

Even the very first level of offensive magic taught at the Academy was enough to gravely wound a human. In a head-to-head battle, any one of the students present had enough power to take out a group of goblins by themselves. This level of magical power was why the standard fighting tactic for sorcerers when facing non-magic users was to maintain a mid- to long-range distance from their opponent. There was no way they would lose as long as they kept that up, short of their opponent having enough mobility to dodge or a high level of defense to block the magic attacks.

"*Electrica Projectilis*!"

The blitz shot Christina launched contained a barrage of lightning bolts that blew away the remaining goblins. Their bodies vanished, leaving behind enchanted gems and concluding the battle. There were two students who had been injured, but Roanna had helped Flora keep the healing up under Alphonse's orders.

The issue now was Rio's whereabouts and how Flora had nearly fallen off the cliff. As everyone calmed down, the air between them grew delicately tense.

"Umm, Princess Flora. How did you fall off the cliff?" Alphonse asked awkwardly in an attempt to clear up the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

situation.

“I was casting *Cura* on the injured when somebody suddenly crashed into me from behind…” Flora answered hesitantly.

“Who was it?” Alphonse asked. One of the female students nervously raised her hand and answered timidly.

“Umm… I believe the one who bumped into Her Highness was Stewart… I was standing right next to Princess Flora, so…” Both her voice and her face seemed rather sickly; she was most likely frightened of Stewart. The boy in question — having just been healed — turned to glare at her with a demonic wrath.

“Are you saying it’s my fault? I was pushed too! I’m a victim!” Stewart yelled insistently, as though he didn’t quite believe it himself.

“Oh, no — I’m not saying it’s your fault at all.” The girl who made the statement withered under Stewart’s glare.

“Then who’s fault do you say it is?”

“Oh, umm… The… the one who pushed you, perhaps?”

“That’s right! Someone pushed me! That person is the culprit!” Stewart declared, shifting the blame off of himself.

“Is this really the time to be searching for a culprit?” Roanna asked, clearly fed up with the topic. Stewart turned to her with a sulky expression.

“T-Then what do you suggest?” Alphonse asked her hurriedly.

“Do we save him, or do we leave the forest? Those are our current options, no?” Roanna frowned as though she found the answer to be obvious.

“T-That’s not something for me to decide alone…”

“Good grief… What do you think the role of the commander is for?” Roanna sighed in disgust at Alphonse’s behavior, unfitting for a commander.

“I-I value the opinion of my squad members too. What does everyone else think?” He looked to the other members

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

for their thoughts.

"...Is he even alive?"

"I don't think there's any way we can save him, since he fell from this height and all. How would we get down there?"

"Yeah, exactly. It's too risky to search for a commoner who might not even be alive."

And so on. Opinions were exchanged, all in opposition of Rio's rescue.

Suddenly, someone abruptly spoke up.

"Actually, it was him. The commoner was the one who pushed me."

It was Stewart.

He had a strangely contemplative look on his face; the students gathered their attention on him.

"That coward was so terrified by the battle that he shoved me away from him. Because he did that, I unwillingly collided with Princess Flora, to my greatest regret..." Stewart said, twisting his face into a look of grief.

"In other words... he feared the crime of killing a royal and dived after the Princess in desperation to save her, falling in her place. Then Stewart should be clear of any wrongdoing..." Alphonse nodded in understanding.

"T-That cannot be! He saved me!" Flora immediately objected, unable to accept that conclusion.

"That's not what the witnesses say. I was pushed by that boy, wasn't I?" Stewart asked, looking at two male students as he did so. They were the students who had thrust Stewart away from them earlier, and they flinched in surprise before responding.

"Y-Yeah. That's what happened."

"I-I saw it too."

Both boys agreed with each other in a rather forced tone. Stewart smiled in satisfaction.

"Did you really see that happen?" Christina asked in a low voice. Her intense gaze nearly caused Stewart and the boys

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

to take a step back.

“Y-Yes, there was no mistaking it,” Stewart said, nodding first. The other two boys followed his lead.

“…I see. What about everyone else? Did anyone else witness what happened?” Christina asked the squad at large, and looked over the group of students. But their reactions were weak — they merely glanced at each other in awkward silence.

“We were all preoccupied with the monsters that appeared… Elise, did you see anything?” Roanna asked. Elise was the girl who had testified to seeing Stewart’s collision with Flora. Stewart also turned to look at Elise, his expression cold.

“Huh? Ah… no, I don’t think so… I didn’t see that much…” Elise responded with a strange nervousness in her tone.

“And that’s the truth?” Roanna pressed.

“Y-Yes!” Elise startled, nodding as her body trembled.

“Then we should decide our next step immediately. Discussing this any more will only lead us in circles,” Roanna said, looking at Alphonse unhappily.

“T-Then perhaps we should get out of this forest first? We’ve been entrusted with the safety of Her Highnesses, so we shouldn’t stay here any longer than necessary…” Flustered, Alphonse turned to Christina for her judgment. Personally, he would have rather focused on minimizing their demerit points than ignoring the exam to rescue Rio, whose fall was his own doing anyway. In his mind, losing a commoner like Rio didn’t count as a major incident.

“Could you stop looking to me for every decision? You’re the commander. Make your commands at your own discretion. Your leadership is all over the place,” Christina warned him with clear irritation on her face.

“Y-Yes ma’am! Then we shall immediately depart for our destination.” The blood drained from Alphonse’s face as he hurriedly came to a decision.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Wait! You’re really just going to abandon him?” Flora demanded in an unrelenting tone.

“W-We are moving on as a team. We cannot afford to put the entire squad at risk over one boy who fell of his own accord,” Alphonse replied, his speech awkward under pressure.

“Of his own accord…? Then… then, I nearly fell off the cliff of my own accord. I shall go save him myself.” Rendered speechless at first, Flora immediately recovered to voice her declaration.

“Absolutely not! You must refrain from such outrageous thoughts, Princess Flora!” Roanna scolded her in a panic.

“Roanna! Even you…? He might be severely injured and waiting for someone to help. Don’t you realize that?”

“…This is a matter of priority versus possibility. There is a possibility he is unharmed… But the exam going on right now is the priority. We cannot ruin our entire drill over an uncertain possibility for a single commoner. That is what the commander has decided, at least,” Roanna explained.

“T-That is why I shall go alone…” Flora said, faltering.

“Surely you are aware that royalty cannot be allowed to wander off alone,” Christina interrupted in a slightly exasperated voice.

“B-But, Christina!”

“Calm down. We haven’t abandoned him completely.”

“…Huh?” Flora looked at her sister in confusion.

“We’ll send a search team out as soon as our squad completes the drill,” Christina assured her, “So for now—”

“MRROOOOH!”

Suddenly, a monstrous roar echoed from the forest; the sound was loud enough to shake the trees. The startled animals in the forest fled all at once, making the students flinch.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. The noise of something hitting the ground sounded rhythmically, then fell silent for

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

a beat, before an even louder sound reverberated. It was as though something enormous had taken a running leap.

Then, a giant figure emerged from the forest, looming in the sky.

“W-What is that?” Roanna exclaimed as she looked up above them.

It was a large humanoid creature, holding a sword carved from stone… But it clearly wasn’t human. Its mouth curved into a fearsome grin when it spotted the students below, before it landed back in the forest. A thunderous roar echoed alongside the tremor of its landing. The ground shook like a small earthquake had occurred, causing the weaker parts of the cliff to crumble away.

“W-Watch out for the cliff!” Roanna yelled, prompting the students to scramble away from the edge — but they didn’t enter the forest. The forest contained that creature, after all.

“It’s heading this way, Alphonse! What do we do?” Roanna yelled, wanting Alphonse to take the lead command, but he had completely shut down in a panic.

“Huh? Uh, w-what…?”

“We either fight or run! Give us your command!” Roanna impatiently pressed Alphonse for a response. But even in that short amount of time, the mysterious creature continued to approach until its huge silhouette peeked through the forest.

“Eek…!”

It presence was so daunting, several of the students’ faces twisted in fear, and cowered in terror with quivering legs. Step by step it approached, until the students finally had a clear view of its whole body.

It had a demonic bull’s face, with thick, pointy horns on its head. Its eyes were brimming with madness, and glowed a menacing, crimson red.

Its frame must have stood over ten feet tall.

The body was covered in rough, black skin, and bulged

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

with huge, rugged muscles. A whip-like tail snapped about behind it.

"M… M-Monster…"

Its overwhelming presence turned the students' expressions into utter despair, but there was still one person who hadn't lost the will to fight.

It was Christina.

"What are you all standing around for?! Do you want to die?!" she said, stepping forth with her staff held at the ready to chant a spell.

"*Fulgur Sphera*!"

A geometric formula appeared at the end of her staff and launched a dense ball of lightning. The thunder ball, which was about three feet high, crackled in the air as it drew close to the monster's head, sparking hope back into students' eyes. But—

"MRROOOOOHH!!"

The bull-headed giant gave a tremendous howl as it raised its stone sword upwards, before bringing it down on the thunder ball in a crushing swing. The impact sent a cloud of dust into the air like an explosion.

"Wha…"

Even Christina was lost for words.

Fulgur Sphera was the strongest offensive magic she had in her arsenal; seeing it smacked down so easily was stunning. The difference in power between the princess and this monster was overwhelming.

"Gufufu."

Seeing Christina's astonishment, the bull-headed giant gave her a creepy smile.

"Eek…!" Christina's body trembled.

"K-Kill it! Use your ice magic! Front guard, use *Augendae Corporis* to beat it up!" Alphonse yelled in a panic. The creature lumbered languidly towards the students as they desperately began to chant.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“*Glacialis Lancea*!” Flora, Roanna, and Elise readied their staves in the rear and chanted the same magic spell. The formula formed at the end of their staves and shot out a spear of ice.

“*Augendae Corporis*!” The male students chanted too. Their bands glowed and summoned the formula, activating their physical ability enchantments. They then charged forward after the barrage of ice lances sent forth by the three girls. However, the bull-headed monster moved and evaded the spears of ice with a swiftness unfitting for its large size. It closed in on one of the male students from the side and swung its sword in a sweeping motion. The student paled in fear of the stone blade as it approached, yet even then, his reflexes had far surpassed that of a normal human, allowing him to raise his shield in time to block the attack. As a result, the male student was blown away by the blade and sent crashing back against a tree.

“Gah…!” he cried out, blood spilling from his mouth before he slumped limply against the ground. Witnessing that, the others completely lost their will to fight, their brave advancement frozen midstep. They could just feel it — there was no way they could win this fight.

“R-Retreat! Retreat now! Run for your lives!” Alphonse shrieked more than yelled. The students scattered in every direction as they fled into the forest. The bull-headed giant cackled with laughter as it slowly pursued them; it was almost as though it was enjoying the sight of the panicking students.

Meanwhile, the shock of seeing her thunder ball deflected had kept Christina rooted in place.

“Princess Christina, please pull yourself together!” Roanna rushed to shake her out of her shock.

“R-Right, thank you… Where’s Flora?” Christina asked, snapping back to the present.

“Nowhere in sight. I believe she has fled with everyone

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

else already — let us hurry too.”

“Very well…”

With a conflicted expression, Christina left with Roanna.

◇◇◇

Just moments earlier, Rio was falling from the cliff towards the forest below. The cliff was easily over 100 feet high, producing that awful floating sensation in his chest.

It was scary… How could it be anything but? It was scary even though he knew he was unlikely to die — unless he made a mistake, that is.

Rio took a deep breath and released his essence, enhancing his physical body as much as he could. If he used magic, the process would involve a spell chant and a formula circle appearing, but neither happened in this circumstance.

Naturally, it wouldn’t — because what Rio was using right now wasn’t sorcery.

There were two types of enchantments that could affect the body: one that enhanced physical abilities, and one that enhanced the physical body. Magic could only enhance physical abilities — there was no known sorcery that could strengthen the body. With only the physical abilities enhanced, the body was known to injure itself while trying to keep up with its enhanced abilities. Many countries had ongoing research to achieve physical body enhancement, but none had succeeded in gaining any progress.

Yet for some reason, Rio was not only able to enhance his physical abilities, but his physical body as well — without the use of magic. This power had been awakened in him by the mysterious girl’s voice five years ago, on the day he regained his memories as Amakawa Haruto.

But there were other things that separated Rio from the people of this world too.

For example: how he could pour his essence into a

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

formula to use sorcery, but he couldn't store that formula within himself to acquire magic. Or, how he could see essence in its pure form — a faint light — when no one else could see it. Or even how he was able to imitate the flow of essence in a formula to recreate the effect of sorcery, despite his incompatibility with formula contracts for storing sorcery.

For example — Rio pushed his hands out towards the ground. A sudden gust of wind blasted from his hands, and the reverse thrust slowed his rapid fall downward. He couldn't stop his descent completely, but it was enough to slow his falling speed — which was all he needed. Rio held out his hands to adjust his landing point with the wind, before grabbing onto a thick branch. The gesture completely killed the momentum of his fall, and he let go of the branch to drop down to the ground gracefully.

"Huh."

With the crisis averted for now, Rio looked back up at the cliff, wondering what to do next. Honestly, it wouldn't be that difficult to climb up and rejoin the others; a 100 foot climb was possible with his enhanced body, and he wouldn't be at risk of dying if he fell, either. But with his inability to use magic, the others would find it strange if he showed up unharmed. That would be a pain. Either way, he needed to know what the situation was up above.

"Guess I'll try to climb up first," he murmured, before starting his ascent with a sigh.

In no time at all, Rio was at the top of the cliff again. He hid in the shadows of a tree and checked in on the state of the other students, who had just finished cleaning up the last of the monsters. He listened to them discuss what their current plan was; frankly speaking, it was a terrible discussion.

Both Alphonse and Stewart — the commander and the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

one who pushed Flora, respectively — were only concerned with protecting themselves.

Nearly all of the students had been too distracted by the surprise attack to witness the moment when Flora was pushed, which Stewart used to his advantage. Rio couldn't hold back his faint smile when he heard the way Stewart bent the truth.

In the end, all the blame for Flora nearly falling off the cliff landed on Rio's shoulders.

Flora herself had desperately tried to stand up for him, but was ultimately overpowered because of the lack of a witness. Yet, for some strange reason, Rio didn't find himself disappointed or despaired, because he hadn't expected anything more to begin with.

Rio lived at the bottom of a society where influence was everything. After all, in a society based on social status, social status itself became power. With enough power, nearly any kind of injustice could be turned a blind eye to. The concept of keeping that power in check didn't exist — the only way to stop the abuse of power was with a higher power. As long as Rio lived in this kind of society with no status of his own, he was helpless against those powers. That was his reality — one that he had learned long ago.

Despite this reality, the reason why he continued to attend the Royal Academy was because of everything he could learn. He knew he wasn't staying beyond graduation, and the time he spent with Celia was pleasant, so the pain was never more than he could bear.

But it seemed like time was up.

If he returned to the academy now, he'd be under false suspicion of pushing Flora off the cliff — and most likely end up in some kind of trouble. And there was no way for Rio to brush off those false accusations; if it came to that, he'd rather leave the academy here and now. He'd planned on graduating before he left the academy, but he had pretty

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

much learned all he could in these last five years. There was no reason to stay any longer.

As long as Rio didn't reveal himself to anyone here, they would all probably assume he was dead. He still needed to return to the academy once more to make the minimum preparations for his departure, but if he planned his timing carefully enough, he'd be able to sneak in without alerting anyone.

Celia's face suddenly flashed across Rio's mind… But his decision was inevitable. He was simply putting his plan into action a little ahead of schedule. That was why—

Let's just get this over with, Rio finally decided.

But in that moment, the demonic, bull-headed giant appeared, making the other students immediately fall into a panic. Rio considered jumping in to assist them for a second, but realized he had no obligation to save the ones who thoughtlessly abandoned him. Instead, he stayed hidden behind the tree and continued to watch. The bull-headed giant was extremely strong — there was very little chance of the students winning against it in a head-on battle.

And yet, to Rio, it didn't appear as though the enemy was fighting seriously.

With a body that large and abilities that polished, it should have been capable of closing the distance between it and the students and deciding the match in an instant. Instead, it looked more like it was making flashy movements to incite the students' fear… for fun. It wasn't as though it didn't attack at all, but it did seem to be going easy on them.

In the meantime, the students had begun to flee. Their line of defense fell as they panicked, most of them only thinking of themselves as they ran and the bull-headed giant pursued them at a leisurely pace. The thought of the other students dying made Rio's face twitch, but he didn't budge.

◇◇◇

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Flora had whisked away the boy that had been knocked unconscious by the bull-headed giant to heal him behind a tree in the forest. With his condition now stabilized, some of the color returned to his pale face. If he had been left alone, he would have died of internal bleeding. Instead, he was now resting peacefully against a tree trunk; with rest, he would make a full recovery.

The others had scattered in every direction, and the monster wandered off while laughing its creepy laugh. An almost eerie silence fell upon the forest and its greenery, signaling the end of the urgent situation. With that, there were no more traces of the panic that had just occurred. Yet, now, Flora was overwhelmed with uncertainty.

She was worried.

She had been separated from Christina and the others… Did they manage to get away?

Then, she thought of Rio. The boy who was scorned as the dunce of the Royal Academy of Beltrum, her savior—

Flora had a plethora of regrets and guilt when it came to the commoner, and she was certain that he hated her, too.

Why wouldn't he?

In the last five years, Flora had done nothing to repay her debt to him, after Rio had suffered from being treated like a criminal in the castle. On top of that, he had been forced to enroll at the Royal Academy in the name of a reward, only to be harassed needlessly for his difference in social status. Rio was always alone — Flora had been shocked to learn that after her enrollment — and he'd been hurt countless times by others.

But even then, he never tried to hurt others in retaliation and simply continued to live his own way, moving forward. Flora thought he was a very strong person, unlike herself, as someone who only lived to please others.

Perhaps that was why, somewhere along the line, Flora's gaze had started to follow Rio in the academy out of

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

admiration.

The others in the academy would ridicule Rio, but she knew his good attributes. Recently, she'd overheard the girls in her class who watched the tournament praise him, which made her feel a little conflicted, but a little proud too. Still, Rio always seemed lonely. Seeing his side profile made Flora's heart squeeze with pain.

She wanted to try talking to him. She had so much she wanted to say… But most of all, she wanted to be his friend.

Yet, she was unable to find her courage, and remained merely a spectator. That alone gave her no right to wish for such things. At that thought, Flora's heart prickled with pain again.

Once, just the other day, she had witnessed Rio chatting amicably with Celia after classes. The two were talking in such a friendly manner, and seeing Rio's expression directed towards Celia made her feel a little jealous. It was an expression that he didn't normally show. Seeing that was what prompted her to gather her courage and talk to Rio today, which went directly against her sister's orders. She was extremely nervous, and her heart had thumped audibly. But she wanted to be strong, like Rio, and took the first step forward.

As a result, she was able to talk to Rio… just a little. That alone had made her so happy that Flora immediately wanted to talk to him more. Rio didn't have much longer at the primary division of the Royal Academy, but she'd try to talk to him more from now on.

And yet…

Rio fell off the cliff saving Flora.

She hadn't done a thing to repay her debt to him, and he saved her anyway.

Now… there was a chance they'd never see each other again.

Please, gods above, I beg of you — Flora murmured in her

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

heart. *Please let him be unharmed.*

Then, just as she made her prayer… *Thump*! The sound of something hitting the ground echoed in the forest. Flora startled with her whole body.

“Is it… that monster?”

This time, she could hear the thunderous sound of something heavy land on the forest floor. It let out a piercing scream, and sounded like it was heading straight towards Flora.

“I-Is it coming back here? The thing…” All the color instantly drained from Flora’s face. “I-I have to get out of here… Ah, but…” There was an unconscious boy right next to her. She wanted to run… But she couldn’t leave him, nor was she sure she could get away while carrying him.

She didn’t know what to do, and she was too scared to think anymore.

In the meantime, *it* had nearly closed the gap between them, and there was no hesitation in its footsteps. *Stomp, stomp, stomp*. The rhythmical footsteps continued on.

W-What? Is it coming this way? Flora held her hands against her mouth to silence her scream, holding her breath while she trembled.

The thing’s footsteps came to a stop on the other side of the tree Flora was hiding behind. She could hear its rough breathing.

“Eek…!”

No… She didn’t want to die. This was terrifying.

“Ah, ah…” Her whole body quivered with fear as she slowly raised her head. The demon-like monster stared back at her as it reached for her small body with its left hand.

This was the end. Flora squeezed her teary eyes shut.

She cowered as the thought of her inevitable death crossed her mind… But no matter how long she waited, the looming hand never closed around her. On the contrary…

“GRRAAAH!”

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

The creature made a pained noise, causing Flora to fearfully opened her eyes. There, she saw the monster's left arm, sliced off cleanly at the wrist. The severed hand rolled on the ground.

"Huh…?"

Flora's jaw dropped in shock. Next to her stood a boy wearing the uniform of the Academy. A boy with a longsword and black hair that Flora knew well — Rio.

"GRAARGH!"

The creature leapt away with a roar. Distancing itself from Rio, it flipped in midair and landed with an earth-shaking rumble. Fury was buried deep in its eyes at it glared cautiously at the boy. "Take that student and run away now," Rio said to Flora in a calm voice, not taking his eyes off the bull-headed giant.

"Huh? Ah, but…" Flora opened and closed her mouth wordlessly in shock.

"Quickly!"

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“O-Okay!” The force behind Rio’s words made Flora reply with a flinch; she rushed to support the unconscious boy on her shoulder. Once Rio saw she was done, he spoke once more.

“Go, now!”

Just as Flora started to move, Rio charged directly at the monster. It welcomed his attack, swinging its sword down. Rio matched that by leaping with his sword in both hands.

They met swords in midair, making sparks fly everywhere.

Rio parried his opponent’s swing by directing the monster’s blade down towards the ground. With its sword buried in the dirt, Rio swung his blade diagonally upwards at the monster’s torso. It hurriedly bent backwards to avoid his attack, but his blade scratched its torso before it could fully evade.

Its skin was much harder than Rio was expecting, but it wasn’t unpiercable. Not a fatal wound, but Rio had managed to do some damage.

“M-MROOOOH!”

With a roar filled with rage, the monster lifted its stone sword and swung it roughly. Rio evaded it, jumping over the entire sword to avoid the swing. He twisted his body in the air and flipped once before landing, keeping his stance low as he sliced at the monster’s feet. The bull-headed giant jumped to avoid it, using the gravity of its fall to slam its sword straight down. The attack would have meant certain death — if it made contact. Rio stepped to the side to avoid it.

The two of their eyes met for a brief moment before they crossed swords again.

The clash of their blades created an impressive gust of wind that shook the surrounding trees. The difference in the size of their swords meant that it was only a matter of time before Rio’s blade wore out and snapped. In order to prevent that, Rio needed to implement some serious parrying

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

techniques. Still, his weapon did not hesitate in the least as it carved its path through the air. Perhaps the long years he spent training had indeed improved his physical movements, as his blade showed no sign of wear.

But this still wasn't easy by any means. Rio faced the endless onslaught of sword attacks, each filled with a killing intent. Each swing was equal to certain death, causing a cold chill to go down his spine.

He was desperate. He didn't want to die — that one thought alone kept his blade moving.

...But if he truly didn't want to die, he wouldn't have initiated a brawl with the creature in the first place... While he had no intention of dying, Rio had no plan of attack when he'd challenged the beast.

And yet, here he was, fighting this monster. He hadn't even realized he challenged it, and he wasn't entirely sure why he'd done so in the first place.

But if he had to pick a reason, it was probably because he felt something towards the girl who had tried to help him, even a little — enough to save her, at least. The same reason had compelled him to dive off the cliff. But that was probably hypocritical of him; there was no guarantee he'd be rewarded for being swept away by his emotions and acting according to his beliefs. This, he was fully aware of; he had failed once before because of that, after all.

Even so, his body moved because of what was in his heart. Just when he'd had the chance to leave the academy without anyone's knowledge, he threw that chance away.

But there was no looking back now. Whatever happened would happen — such indifferent thoughts passed through his mind as he desperately swung his sword.

Perhaps his senses had been sharpened by the body enchantment, or perhaps this high-stakes battle heightened his focus to its limits, but all of his opponents' movements seemed slow to him.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Strangely, he didn't feel like he could lose.

Rio had been exchanging the litany of blows with the creature for just a few moments before an opportunity to end the struggle presented itself. Until now, Rio had been using the minimum amount of effort to parry the enemy's blade, waiting for the right moment to launch his own all-out attack...

"MROH!"

The monster shouted and gave a huge swing of its sword; its frustration with its inability to put an end to the match — against a underwhelmingly tiny opponent — had made its movements careless.

Rio didn't let that brief chance slip by.

Before his enemy could bring down its sword, he launched a swift attack against its torso. His blade landed cleanly, straight across his opponent's body, making the giant's face twist with anguish. It flung its sword around in pain, but Rio backstepped safely out of reach.

But he wasn't running away. His true objective was to prepare for the timing of an all-out attack. Rio held his sword in both hands and kicked off from the ground.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

With a feverous yell, he launched his best shot with all his might. The bull-headed creature also lowered its sword through its pain, but failed to make contact. Rio used his enemy's body as a stepping stone to rush upwards, then sliced its neck off.

The severed head flew through the air as the headless frame swayed and fell to its knees. The fierce glint of light faded from the creature's deep crimson eyes. After a short pause, its body snapped apart, and rapidly started to crumble away, and disintegrated until there was nothing left.

Only a considerably large aqua stone remained — an enchanted gem. The ones left behind by the goblins and orcs couldn't even compare.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Rio picked up the fallen enchanted gem. “So it really was a monster…” he murmured as he inspected the stone up close.

Enchanted gems were the only items monsters left behind — it was the one signature that all monsters had in common. Still, it was quite rare to find such a violent monster like this one just loitering about. The academy certainly wouldn’t hold a drill in the vicinity of it…

So why did it appear in this forest? Had it migrated here from somewhere else? Just as Rio pondered that—

“Princess Flora!”

The echoes of people calling Flora’s name could be heard from far across the now-silent forest. They were probably searching for her.

Rio scanned the forest, searching the gaps between the trees with his eyes. He stopped on a moving mass just barely inside the limits of his vision.

It was Flora.

She had probably observed Rio’s battle from afar, but he didn’t to get into any more trouble. With that in mind, he immediately left the scene.

◇◇◇

In the sky, far above the current scene, a black-robed Reiss was floating through the air. His eyes, which far surpassed the ability of any human’s vision, were focused on a hastily retreating Rio.

“…And there he goes. Well, that was much more interesting than I expected… Definitely worth the effort of sending in a powered-up minotaur. Heheheh.” Reiss couldn’t help the smile that played on his lips.

“That black hair probably means he’s an immigrant from the Yagumo region. If so, it makes sense that he can use spirit arts — but it’ll be terrifying to see what the future holds for him,” the man analyzed with a hum.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Spirit arts — a secret art unlike any sorcery that had yet to spread through the Strahl region. There were some records of it hidden deep within the tomes of old literature, but no detailed knowledge about it was available. What *was* known about it was that it was similar to sorcery, in the way that essence was used to cause abnormal phenomena to occur, spell names didn't need to be chanted, and that it was used mainly by elves, dwarves, and werebeasts — species that humans looked down upon and referred to as "demi-humans."

Yet, somehow, Reiss had insight on spirit arts that no normal person had access to. That was why he understood why it was so amazing that Rio, a human living in Strahl, could use this level of spirit arts at his age.

"If I cannot feel any of the aural characteristics of spirits at this close distance, then he must not have a contract with a spirit. I suppose I shall just take a note of it and leave him be. That would suit *that person*'s plan better. Now, I must return to my original mission..." he said, before gliding off through the air into the distance.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 7: Truth of the Lie

On the evening of the outdoor drill, Celia was walking through the Academy grounds.

“Good grief! What am I, a slave? Do your own research! Just because I’m the lowest ranked professor here doesn’t mean I’m a secretary! And it isn’t exactly easy to find information about monsters from the Divine War…” Celia grumbled under her breath as she headed for the director’s office.

Her bitterness was due to the order she’d received from her superior to investigate a certain monster while she was doing her own research in the library.

“I was even told to go to the director’s office… What’s the rush?”

She briefly considered the possibility of the monster in question appearing somewhere, but dismissed the thought immediately.

The monster Celia had researched was a *minotaur*, a monster shaped like a person with a bull’s head. It had played a large role in the Divine War, a great war that had occurred over a thousand years ago. The Divine War was a conflict that had spread between the humans, who were led by the Six Wise Gods, and the demons, who were led by the Demon King. Minotaurs were said to have drastically decreased in population towards the end of the Divine War. They were very rarely spotted in the kingdoms towards the north and west, but there had been no sightings in Beltrum for the last several hundred years.

Celia contemplated such things as she arrived at the director’s office. She stopped before the door, noticing that it

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

was slightly ajar. The voice of the director, Garcia Fontaine, could be heard talking to the superior who had given her the order. She peeked through the gap to check if she could go inside.

"But the matter of Her Highness being pushed off the cliff cannot be so peacefully resolved. I suppose some form of punishment will be necessary?" Garcia asked with a hint of annoyance.

Celia leaned in at the mention of something so serious.

"I'm afraid it cannot be avoided. However, there is also a conflict in the facts presented... It seems there is no mistaking that Duke Huguenot's son was the one who collided with Her Highness, but..."

"But?"

"Over half the students are testifying that the one who pushed Duke Huguenot's son in the first place was a student named Rio. On the other hand, the Second Princess herself is insistent that that cannot be possible..."

Huh? Rio? What was going on? Celia gulped nervously at the unexpected mention of Rio's name.

"And why is that?" Garcia asked.

"Because this Rio was also the student that saved her from falling off the cliff. At the cost of falling off himself."

He fell off a cliff? Was Rio still alive...? A chill suddenly ran down Celia's spine.

"Then where is this Rio now?"

"Missing. After falling off the cliff, he appeared once more while the aforementioned monster was attacking the Second Princess, who had been separated from the others. But he immediately disappeared again after defeating the creature."

Thank goodness. He was alive — while his missing status intrigued Celia, that alone was a relief to hear.

"That would certainly imply he had no intention of harming Her Highness. Does he have a motive for pushing the son of Duke Huguenot?"

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“According to the students, he panicked when the group of monsters attacked.”

Rio, panicking over a few monsters? ...Something didn’t sound right to Celia.

“I see... Then is there any testimony that disproves that majority opinion?”

“No, no one including the Second Princess witnessed anything contradictory.”

“Hmm...”

“The fact that he hid himself afterwards is proof of his guilt. Otherwise, he would have stepped forward and explained himself,” the elderly professor declared boldly to Garcia, who appeared contemplative.

“If it were possible to completely prove his innocence, perhaps,” Garcia murmured quietly.

“Huh?”

“Mmm, it’s nothing.”

“Very well... Then what shall be done about the report to the castle? Duke Huguenot is pressing for it to be written immediately.”

“Hm. If we were to disappoint Duke Huguenot here, that dissatisfaction would surely reach His Majesty. We conveniently have a scapegoat at the ready... It would be unwise to thoughtlessly make a bigger deal of these matters.”

“Then shall I consolidate it as an issue caused by a student named Rio in the report to submit to the royal court?”

What was that...? So they weren’t even going to give Rio the chance to explain himself? Anger surged within Celia as the conversation turned towards abandoning Rio.

“That’s right. The majority of students testified to the same story. The rest we can leave to Duke Huguenot in the royal court — he should be able to take care of that much himself.”

Honestly speaking, Garcia couldn’t care less what the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

truth was. Whichever option was the most convenient and least messy would be his version of the truth.

"Then I shall proceed to report that to the court."

"I leave it to you. I shall bring the report to His Majesty and await his judgment. Inform all the teachers that the child is to be apprehended if he returns to the academy."

"Understood."

Celia trembled with worry as she eavesdropped on their business-like exchange. What should she do? Rio was in danger at this rate... and Celia believed in him. She couldn't quite figure out the sequence of events from the conversation just now, but she was certain that Rio would never push Stewart out of panic.

...Although she could definitely imagine the reverse happening.

Rio had probably disappeared because he knew he would be placed under suspicion. It was quite easy to say he hadn't done it, but to prove it would require the devil's proof. Rather than having to jump through hoops to disprove these false accusations, it'd be easier to get a running start from the beginning.

With that realization on Celia's mind, she took a deep breath to calm herself and knocked on the door.

◇◇◇

That night, Rio returned to the capital and snuck into his bedroom in the Academy dormitory.

The city gates were normally closed at night, making it impossible to enter the walls, but Rio had enhanced his physical body and abilities to gain the power to leap over the walls entirely, successfully sneaking in. Once inside the walls, there was nothing he had to fear. Similarly, he jumped over the wall into the nobles' inner city and headed for the academy.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

With most of the students back at home, the security at night was much weaker than during the daytime. Rio used his extensive knowledge of the academy grounds to easily walk around without being discovered by the patrols. Eventually, Rio opened the door to his now-familiar bedroom, noting that there was no sign of anyone else having entered his room yet… Though he didn't have very many belongings to begin with. Once he had confirmed the state of his effects, he removed the bag hidden beneath his bed. Inside was nearly all the reward money he had received from saving Flora five years ago. It was more than enough to live off from now on.

Next, Rio took out a change of clothes from his drawer and placed the money in the bag attached to his belt. While the academy uniform was excellent in combat, it unfortunately stood out too much.

Once he was done preparing, Rio left his room. He headed towards the only person in the academy he could trust — Celia.

I hope she's still around…

Celia often holed herself up in her research laboratory until late in the evening. Praying she hadn't headed home yet, Rio traversed down the familiar underground corridor below the library tower. Most of the professors had left for the day, making the silence in the corridor more prominent than usual. Keeping an eye out for others, he eventually arrived at Celia's research laboratory to see the light from a lamp shining from the gap beneath the door.

It seemed like Celia was still inside, so Rio knocked quietly on the door.

"Who's knocking so late—"

Celia opened the door with a little pout, but her eyes widened dramatically at the sight of Rio. She was almost about to shout when he gently covered her mouth with a finger.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Shh. I apologize for the disturbance. If possible, I wish to speak with you,” Rio said in a low voice.

Celia couldn’t help but blush before she glanced up and down the corridor.

“Come in,” she whispered, inviting Rio into the room. Once both of them were inside, the door shut with a click. Rio was agonizing over where to start his explanation when Celia moved in for a tight hug.

“P-Professor?” Rio asked in confusion. He could feel Celia’s warmth through his clothing; it felt like her heart was thumping loudly, too.

“You’re not hurt, are you?”

After a moment, Celia touched his body as if to check for injuries.

“That tickles… But I’m fine,” Rio said, smiling at the ticklish feeling.

“Thank goodness…” With tears in her eyes, Celia smiled in relief.

Ah, it’s Rio… He’s safe — she was overjoyed. Released from her worries, the tight feeling in her chest finally loosened up.

“Did you hear anything about the drill yet?”

“Yes. They said you pushed Stewart and placed Princess Flora in danger… And that you defeated a minotaur by yourself…”

“Second part of that aside, the first part is a completely false accusation,” Rio stated with a tinge of exasperation.

“I knew it! There was no way you’d do such a thing.”

“Thank you for believing in me…”

“That should be obvious!” Celia asserted immediately.

“But that isn’t the case for everyone else. I really appreciate it,” Rio said with a shy smile. Celia hugged Rio once more.

“…It’s all right. I believe you. I know you, after all.”

I have no allies in this academy — Rio might have been

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

thinking.

You have an ally here in me — that was what Celia wanted to tell him.

“Professor…”

Warm.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt warmth from another person. Unable to resist that comfort, Rio allowed Celia to cling to him for a while.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Hey, will you tell me what happened? I’m not quite sure if I have the story right…” Celia eventually asked.

“Sure, I guess. It all started during the drill…”

“How could they say that?! It clearly wasn’t your fault!”

After Rio finished speaking, Celia released all her pent-up anger.

“Those with power have the right to decide whose fault it is,” Rio said in a sage voice, as though he had given up from the start. In a society structured around social status, justice was a fluid concept decided by the powerful.

That was why justice would never befall the weak. Justice existed for the strong.

“Maybe, but… Rio, you’re being falsely accused when you’ve done nothing wrong!” Rio’s words, steeped in realism, made Celia shout with a pained look.

“But even if I came forward with the truth, the powerful ones of this kingdom would never take my side. If anything, they’d persecute me further because the son of Duke Huguenot was involved in this incident.”

The current Great Lord of Beltrum was Duke Huguenot. In contrast, Rio was just a commoner with no status nor support.

If the truth behind this case were to be exposed, Duke Huguenot would suffer greatly on the political front. While the incident itself was an accident, his son had nearly killed a member of the royal family. Considering the current political status of Beltrum, that wouldn’t be a desirable situation for the powers of both the royalty and nobility of the kingdom. That was because of Duke Arbor, who — after losing much of his power in his failure five years ago — had regained a somewhat significant portion of his influence within the royal court.

Recently, the Huguenot and Arbor factions had been butting heads behind-the-scenes over diplomatic relations

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

with a hostile kingdom. That hostile kingdom was the Proxia Empire — an emerging nation to the north that had invaded many of the smaller kingdoms in the region, causing tensions to run high with Beltrum. The king and Duke Huguenot's faction supported peaceful discussions to curtail the tense relations, while Duke Arbor's faction supported a more aggressive approach that required military expansion. Duke Huguenot's faction was still winning out at the moment, but any failure now would be sure to tip the scales in Duke Arbor's favor.

If that happened, it would only be a matter of time before war was declared.

That was an undesirable outcome for many of the royalty and nobility, including the king himself.

Against that kind of political backdrop, would the other royalty and nobility desire to see failure from Duke Huguenot's family? If Stewart's foolish indignation was dragged out into the open, would they refrain from pointlessly stirring up a confrontation?

Indeed, if everything could be solved by pushing all the blame onto a commoner, then it would be a cheap price to pay. Even Rio and Celia could understand that reasoning when they calmly thought about it.

"I'm sorry. I really wish I could do something for you, but…" Celia bit her lip and apologized in frustration. Even if she wanted to prove Rio's innocence, she clearly lacked the power to do so. There was no point in being idealistic or enraged without the power to change his reality. It was almost too frustrating to bear.

"Please don't apologize," Rio said in a gentle voice. "It's all thanks to you, Professor. I was only able to go on until now because you were here. I'm glad to have met you… I truly think that."

"Rio…" Celia's face distorted with sadness. She had an idea of what he was going to say next.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“That’s why I came to say goodbye, Professor. I am leaving this kingdom.”

The brutally heartrending farewell was exactly what Celia expected.

“…Do you know where you’re going?”

“I’ve mentioned it before, but I’m thinking of visiting my parents’ hometown.”

“Your parents’ hometown… Are you really going to the Yagumo region? Will you be all right?”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll work out. Probably.” Rio answered as brightly as he could to ease Celia’s worries.

“…Shall I go with you? Do you have money?” Celia asked after thinking hard for a moment.

“It’d be a huge crisis if you disappeared, Professor. I’ll be fine. I still have a lot of money left from my reward. I know — I’ll send you a letter while I’m on the road. Under an alias, of course.”

“…You absolutely have to, okay? I won’t forgive you if you forget.”

“Yes ma’am.” Rio nodded with a smile.

“What name will you send it as?

“Right, let’s see… How about… Haruto.” Rio briefly hesitated before giving her his pen name. It was Rio’s name in his past life.

“Haruto, got it.” Celia murmured the name to herself, as though carving it into her mind.

“Then… I’ll be off now.”

With those words to mark his departure, Rio gently pushed Celia’s body away from him.

“Ah…” Celia let out a hoarse voice as Rio’s warmth left her. “I’ll see you again, right?”

She put on the biggest smile she could manage as she asked with a trembling voice.

“…Yes, we’ll definitely meet again.” Rio thought a moment before nodding, showing her his gentle smile.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Then take care of yourself, and come back safely. See you later.” Celia stifled the anxieties whirling in her chest and gave a sad smile.

“Yes… see you later,” Rio replied, then slowly turned on his heel. He took one step, then two, away from Celia.

She felt as though her heart would burst as she watched his retreating back. If she let her guard down, even a little, she would probably end up clinging to his back in tears.

But she couldn’t. She couldn’t cry right now. She had to see Rio off with her head held high, so that she wouldn’t hold him back. Celia chewed at her lip.

Without another word, Rio silently left the room. The door shut quietly behind him.

The dam broke instantly as her tears spilled from her eyes.

Looking back on it now, the one being saved by their time together was Celia, not Rio.

From infancy, she had been pushed to move forward, much to the envy of her surroundings. She had no intimate friends close to her, so having someone to talk to without reservation was both new and precious to her. The time she spent with Rio every day was fun, and she had been overjoyed to hear that Rio considered her a friend.

“I’m sorry, Rio… I couldn’t help you…”

The sounds of Celia’s sniffles continued to echo from her room for a while longer.

◇◇◇

“Excuse me.”

Flora was paying a visit to her father’s suite. Once she was granted permission, she entered to find herself in the presence of not only Phillip III, but Garcia as well. She was surprised, but having the academy director here was actually more convenient for her. She hardened the resolve within

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

her, clutching at the hem of her dress as she bowed in greeting.

“What is the matter, my dearest Flora?” Phillip III asked brazenly, thought he had an idea.

“I have come to speak with you with regards to the drill, Father. There is something I wish to say,” Flora declared rather stiffly with a determined expression.

Phillip III’s eyes widened slightly at a glimpse of his daughter’s strong determination, something he had rarely seen, until now.

“…Worry not. I have already heard the details of this case from Garcia.”

“Then surely that person — Rio — will not be subjected to any blame… Is that correct?” Flora inquired directly, after the result she desired.

“Unfortunately, that cannot be.”

“…But why, Father?” Flora sent an admonishing gaze towards the king, who shook his head with a frown.

“It is not that I am overlooking your testimony. The reality is, several students witnessed the eldest son of the House of Huguenot being pushed. As a result, you — a member of the royal family — were put in danger. That is more than enough reason to enact punishment.”

“But he was the one who saved me! There’s no way he would do such a thing!”

“Then why did the boy disappear afterwards? I am grateful to him for saving you on numerous occasions… But there is no doubt that his actions this time are suspicious.”

“That’s… that’s because everyone treats him badly! Because we don’t believe in him, he…”

“Ah, youth.” Garcia chuckled in amusement at Flora’s appeal.

“What do you mean by that, Director Garcia?” Flora asked with a pout.

“Ideals and reality may not always coincide. As one who

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

lives among the privileged, it would do you well to learn that, Princess."

"...Please don't change the topic. What kind of report did you give my father? I await your satisfactory answer," Flora demanded, refusing to be fooled easily.

"My *dear*, I simply collected the testimonies of the students." Contrary to his biting tone, Garcia smiled like a good-natured old man.

"Do try not tease my adorable daughter too much, Garcia."

"Ahem. Please accept my apologies," Garcia offered at Phillip III's warning, keeping his thoughts about overly-doting parents to himself.

"Flora, my dear. As long as there is a reason for prosecution, any exceptions would cause great unrest within the nobility class. However, it *is* true that the boy saved you from danger. He will be charged with the crime, but I am thinking of granting him reprieve. Will that ease your woes?" the king asked.

"How lenient," Garcia muttered under his breath. The king silenced him with a glare.

"Even with reprieve from the sentence, the crime will still be on his record..." Flora said with a pout. In other words, Rio would be treated as a criminal no matter what.

With an official charge of guilt and a criminal record, any hopes for a bright future would be dashed. Even if Rio were to remain in Beltrum, his door to success was as good as closed and locked tight.

"I understand. However..." Phillip trailed off. Garcia watched their conversation with a pleasant smile, as though it was none of his business. The king's troubled gaze wandered, seeking Garcia for help.

"Princess, please calm yourself," Garcia interjected in exasperation. "We are far too busy to entertain the every whim of a child."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Flora closed her mouth grumpily. “I just cannot forgive wrongdoings.”

“And that is why I am calling you a child. Detach your emotions from your actions. As royalty, you will have many experiences where your emotions and actions won’t meet in the middle.” Garcia didn’t even think the incident this time was worth becoming emotional over in the first place — but he didn’t say that out loud.

Flora had been completely silenced. Tears welled in her eyes. She came to the painful realization that they would treat her like a spoiled child regardless of what she said.

It was incredibly frustrating.

Flora had always quietly obeyed her father and sister. There was no offense in their words, so she usually believed that it was the right thing to do…

But this time, she couldn’t believe them.

“Very well.”

She mumbled the words she didn’t believe herself, as she understood now that her words had no power. She couldn’t do anything on her own — her heart felt like it was splitting from the pain.

The only thing she could do was pray for Rio’s safety.

Flora cursed her own helplessness.

The year was 996 of the Holy Era — over five years had passed since Rio regained his memories of another world.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Epilogue

In the inner city of the capital of Beltrant…

In a room in the Huguenot residence, the current head of the family, Gustav Huguenot, was looking down at a little girl, who was just under ten years old.

Her pale orange hair reached down to her shoulders, and while her face was very cute, her eyes showed nearly no sign of life. She wore a baggy brown robe over clothes that seemed easy to move in, but it was quite cold to only be wearing one layer of the material.

No — her greatest characteristic lay elsewhere.

The girl had small fox ears and a twitching fox tail, which were physical features characteristic to werefoxes.

Werebeasts — they were grouped together along with elves and dwarves by the human race as demi-humans.

Because the demi-humans' territory was located towards the center of the continent, there were barely any in the western region of Strahl where humans inhabited. They rarely showed themselves in human-occupied territories.

However, there were still demi-beings that snuck into human territory out of curiosity; there were also those born into slavery under human owners. For those demi-humans, it was their fate to be treated as slaves.

It was especially bad for werebeasts.

As beings halfway between human and beast, many saw them as impure. Higher-class humans, with their refined hobbies, were known to keep them as slaves; they saw themselves as saviors, giving worth to impure existences by keeping them as pets.

The girl's mother was a captured slave who fell ill several

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

years after giving birth and passed away. For the record, half breed children between humans and werebeasts would only inherit the characteristics of one parent, making the girl a pure werebeast. The girl was born, raised, and kept as a pet in Duke Huguenot's residence. Thus, while she could hold a simple conversation, she had not received a proper education. There was only one skill that she was taught…

"This is your next assassination target. Remember this scent." Duke Huguenot threw a single piece of cloth at the fox-eared girl.

Yes, she had been trained as an assassin.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

The physical abilities of werebeasts were remarkably higher than humans — their five senses were exceptional, and a werefox's ability to detect scents was on par with a dog. They could be raised as excellent war puppets.

"Yes."

With a nod, the girl brought the cloth to her nose to memorize the scent, then put it away in her pocket.

"Your target is twelve years old. Sex is male. Name is Rio. He has black hair, so he should be instantly recognizable by appearance. Kill him by all means necessary — even if you have to sacrifice yourself as a result. That's what you were raised for, after all. Remember: you cannot run as long as you have that collar. Go."

"Under… stood." The fox-eared girl replied to Duke Huguenot's order in her faltering way of speech with a nod. Instead of a glint of hope in her eyes, the metal collar around her throat had snatched it and glinted dully instead.

After that, the girl put on her hood and left the room and the residence.

Sniff, sniff.

As she tried to locate the scent of the assassination target, she felt a strange nostalgic feeling.

Warm…

Somewhere deep within her long-frozen heart, something started to melt… But that strange sensation instantly disappeared.

The girl left the mansion to find Rio, her assassination target.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Afterword

Dear readers of the novel version (this book), it's nice to meet you. My name is Yuri Kitayama.

Dear readers of the web version, thank you for continuing to support this series. This is Yuri Kitayama.

No matter which reader you are, thank you for showing your interest in the first volume of *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles*.

Now, there may be people confused by my use of the terms 'novel version' and 'web version,' so allow me to explain that first:

This *Seirei Gensouki* series first started as a novel I submitted to the website *Let's Become a Novelist*, which I am still updating now. After receiving much love from the readers there, HJ Bunko graciously extended an offer to me that thus led to the publication of this novel version. And so, you can access the web version of *Seirei Gensouki* at any time you wish on the *Let's Become a Novelist* website through your PC or phone.

That being said, reading the web version won't reduce the excitement nor fun of reading the novel version. Nor is reading the web version necessary to enjoy the novel version.

In order to allow the story to be enjoyable no matter which version you choose to read, the novel version of *Seirei Gensouki* is a remake (or rewrite, really) of the contents of the web version (specifically speaking, the basic story line is borrowed from the web version with a few additional scenes, altered scenes, increased heroine time, change of setting, etc...).

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

So if this makes both the novel and web versions enjoyable, I will consider myself a very lucky author.

There is also something else I'd like to say before I run out of room... I'd like to express my deepest gratitude for all those involved with *Seirei Gensouki*, now and in the future.

Firstly, to the readers of both the web and novel versions who continue to show my humble work love, thank you very much! There would be no *Seirei Gensouki* without you.

To the proofreaders who check for minute typos and language expressions, store owners who advertise and promote this work, thank you all very much.

Furthermore, to the editors at HJ Bunko and involved parties at Hobby Japan: thank you for your pains in publishing *Seirei Gensouki*!

I am especially grateful to my editor, N, from the bottom of my heart! Thank you for gently guiding a completely lost newbie author like me through our first meeting together, and for working so hard behind-the-scenes to get this work out. I will be in your care from now on too!

Finally, to my illustrator, Riv. Thank you so much for your numerous, beautifully colored illustrations of *Seirei Gensouki*. Even details that I hadn't considered as the author (especially backgrounds and clothes) had so much detail put on them. The cute and colorful expressions of the heroines make me grin every day. From the bottom of my heart, thank you! I'd like to wrap things up here for now... I hope we can continue to meet now and far into the future. The publication of Volume 2 has already been decided, so hopefully I'll see you again there!

Yuri Kitayama
August 2015

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Bonus Short Stories

Pitter-Patter on a Shared Umbrella

In the year 996 of the Holy Era…

It was after class at the Royal Academy of Beltrum, and most of the elementary school students had gone home. Rio, who had turned twelve that year, was taking advantage of the lack of people on the school grounds to take his training sword and practice alone in the square behind the library tower. He moved his limbs, swinging his sword and imitating the basic forms.

As long as he had the time, he made sure to never miss practice, and continued to fine-tune his body and techniques in silence, without emotion. Because of this, his movements were refined and extremely polished. A light sheen of sweat broke out on Rio's forehead, and his breathing came out a bit roughly as he practiced.

Standing on the upper floors of the library tower was someone watching Rio. It was Flora. She had come to the library after class to study and just happened to catch sight of Rio's figure practicing outside the window. He completely captured her gaze.

"May I ask what you are looking at, Princess Flora?"

Someone addressed Flora from behind her, making her turn around in a flurry. It was Christina and her attendant Roanna, both of whom had accompanied her to the library.

"A-Ah, no, it's nothing. I was thinking about how the skies are cloudy, so it might rain on our way back," Flora said with an uncomfortable smile pasted on her face. Christina slowly stepped forward and approached the window.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“S-Sister!”

Flora tried to stop her, but it was too late. Christina looked down and spotted Rio in the middle of his practice. Her brow furrowed in the slightest, and she let out a tired sigh.

“Flora, you…”

Roanna also approached the window in a casual manner. She immediately realized what Flora had been looking at, and a conflicted expression appeared on her face. Flora guiltily looked down at her feet.

Rio’s near-artistic movements had drawn all three of their gazes. They watched on silently for a few seconds.

“Oh my, is that… Professor Celia, by any chance?” Roanna said, pointing at a figure who walked up to Rio and started a conversation with him. Rio was replying to Celia’s words with a soft smile on his face.

Seeing a glimpse of that expression on Rio afar—an expression of his true self that he never showed in the Academy—made Flora and Roanna widen their eyes in surprise. Christina remained indifferent.

“Ah… Rain,” Flora murmured.

Drip, drip. Droplets of water began to fall from the sky.

“We should leave,” Christina said in a near-curt voice. She turned on her heel and walked away from the window.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Roanna said, immediately following after her.

But Flora appeared reluctant to do the same, remaining frozen at the window. Her gaze was fixed on Rio and Celia’s intimate conversation, following them as they started to walk out of the rain together.

“Come, Flora. You wanted us to help you with your studies, no?”

“Yes…”

Realizing that if the tone of her voice was any indication, Christina would not take no for an answer, Flora hesitantly

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

dragged her feet over toward them. Seeing that made Roanna give a small, listless sigh.

Meanwhile, Rio had opened the umbrella he brought along after seeing the weather report and invited Celia to join him underneath it. The two walked side-by-side, their shoulders closely bumping into one another's.

"I-It doesn't seem like it'll end anytime soon. How about a break in my research lab?" Celia asked in a rather high-pitched voice, a blush on her face.

"Okay, I'll come visit after I've changed. But I'll accompany you to the library tower first, Professor. Let's go," Rio nodded with a smile and began to walk at a leisurely pace.

The umbrella was a little too small to cover the both of them, so Rio adjusted the position of the umbrella to center above Celia.

"R-Rio, I don't mind getting wet, so you can hold the umbrella in the middle. You'll catch a cold otherwise." Realizing Rio was getting wet, Celia faintly shifted her body to the side.

"I'll be changing immediately, so it's all right. A lady shouldn't let her body or beautiful clothes get wet, Professor. Please come closer this way," Rio said, stepping closer to Celia.

"I-I'm fine, this is nothing!"

At the light touch to her shoulder, Celia shook her head nervously. She maintained her distance from Rio with an embarrassed look.

"You shouldn't do that."

"A-Ahaha."

Rio attempted to close the distance between them once more, but Celia continued to back away from him with awkward steps.

"I'm sorry, is it because I smell of sweat? I was exercising a lot before."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“N-No! That’s not it! If anything, you smell goo—wait, what am I saying?! I sound like a pervert! That’s not what I meant, Rio!” With her face flushed bright red, Celia shook her head furiously. Rio chuckled at her.

“Then will you please come under the umbrella? So you don’t get wet.”

“O-Okay… is this all right?”

Celia nodded to hide her scarlet cheeks. She stepped back under the umbrella and stuck closer to Rio, as though declaring he didn’t smell badly at all.

“Let’s go.”

While she was a little *too* close this time, Rio continued to escort her all the way to the library tower like a true gentleman.

Afternoon Tea Party

Scattered about the grounds of the Royal Academy of Beltrum were several tea rooms used for socializing. After their classes, many of the female students would gather within those rooms and host tea parties.

One day in the Year 996 of the Holy Era, several noble daughters had gathered in one of the tea rooms in the Academy. The host was a high ranking noble daughter in her fifth year, and there were around ten others in attendance—including Flora, who was given the seat of honor as the highest-ranked individual present.

Being that a tea party was a social gathering for daughters of nobility to socialize, stiff and formal conversations were generally avoided. Discussions usually started with a review of the desserts brought out, comments on accessories worn, and other such harmless chit-chat. They would each display their education and upbringing, commenting on each others’ clothing or trinkets, making the atmosphere warm and familiar before moving onto personal matters.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

“So… Princess Flora. I’ve heard that you’ll be joining Her Highness, Princess Christina, for the upcoming outdoor drill. It’s been said that many outstanding students have gathered in that group, too.” After a while, the noble daughter acting as the host of the tea party brought up the topic of the outdoor drill.

“I’ve heard the same rumors. Lady Roanna from the House of Fontaine, Lord Stewart from the House of Huguenot, and Lord Alphonse from the House of Rodan will all be present.”

“Oh, my! If it isn’t a gathering of pure talent. I must say I am *most* envious.”

One after another, the other daughters latched onto the topic before Flora could even respond.

“Furthermore, I heard *that person* will be there too,” the host daughter said suggestively, hinting heavily at a certain person’s participation.

“Don’t tell me… by that person, do you mean *that person?*” a different noble daughter gasped in surprise and parroted back in question. The host daughter gave a single nod.

Meanwhile, Flora and the other girls were sporting rather confused expressions on their faces.

“Whom do you speak of?” Flora asked with her head tilted in question.

“The sixth-year student, Lord Rio, but of course.”

At the host daughter’s answer, all the other ladies at the table let out shrill sounds of delight.

“What is wrong with Lord Rio?” Flora asked with a slightly high-pitched voice, surprised by the reactions of the girls.

“It’s not that anything is wrong, but didn’t he have that superb fight at the tournament the other day? I was holding my breath and I didn’t even realize it.”

“Me too. It was as though I was witnessing a beautiful

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

dance… He has a pretty and refined face, the type who draws peoples' eyes to him even from afar."

"Precisely. And his grades outside of his swordcraft are exceptional as well. Now that he has proved his worth at the tournament, his path to becoming a knight is all but secured, don't you think?"

"Perhaps he has already received an invitation to do just that."

The ladies continued to noisily praise and gossip about Rio for some time.

Since when did he become so highly esteemed…?

Not much attention had fallen upon Rio in these past five years, and she hadn't heard many rumors of him, either. Stunned at how quickly the girls flipped their attitudes about Rio for their own self-interests, Flora widened her eyes.

"Come to think of it, wasn't Lord Rio enrolled into this academy as a reward for saving Princess Flora?"

The host daughter looked towards the girl in question, and the other ladies all jumped onto the new topic.

"Oh my, how wonderful! That sounds almost like a fairytale."

"Yes, I am most curious about how the two were fated to meet."

"Princess Flora, would you please tell us more about the events that transpired?"

Sure enough, the daughters joyfully reacted to the words of the host and pressed Flora with more questions.

"The events that occurred back then…? Ah… I was unconscious for most of the time, so I cannot quite recall that much in detail. But if you are still interested, in spite of that…"

Flora looked back on her memories of that time and hesitantly began to speak about how she met Rio.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]